

Study Report on

**Women in the Fifth and Seventh
Parliaments of Bangladesh: A Study
on Opinion of Women Members
of Parliament (MPs)***

Prepared by

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Glossary

Ahongker	Pride
Alongker	Ornament
Amra	We
Barong	Rather
Chatra	Student
Dal	Party
Daler	Party's
Dhal	Protector
Fatwa	Religious Verdict
Jagodal	A Political Party
Jatiyo	National
Jativotabadi	Nationalist
Madrasah	Religious School
Mahila	Woman
Mastan	Muscleman
Mukti Bahini	Freedom Fighters
Nai	No
Nari	Woman
Noi	Not
Oikyabaddha	United
Parishad	Council
Peer	Holy man
Samaj	Society
Sangsad	Parliament
Tolowar	Sword

List of Abbreviations

AL	Awami League
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
EC	Election Commission
ECNEC	Executive Committee of the National Economic Council
HSC	Higher Secondary Certificate
JEI	Jamat-E-Islami
JP	Jatiyo Party
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Government Organization
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
UF	United Front
UFC	Uniform Family Code
UN	United Nations
UP	Union Parishad
US	United States

Executive Summary

Present piece is a study report on the opinions of the women Members of the Fifth and Seventh Parliaments of Bangladesh. The main objective of the study is to know the experiences of the women Members of Parliaments (MPs). The study is based on data collected through a questionnaire. The areas covered in the questionnaire are: role of women MPs in the House, impact of reservation system, continuation of reservation system, number of the reserved seats and electoral process, most interesting discussion in the Parliament, performances of women MPs in the process of law making, role of women MPs in the Committees, women chairpersonship in the parliamentary Committees, cooperation received from male MPs and local administration, prospects of parliamentary democracy, evaluation of their self performances etc.. A total of 57 women MPs have been interviewed for the present research. Out of 57 MPs, 27 belonged to Awami League (AL), 25 were adhered to Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) while 4 belonged to Jatiyo Party (JP) and the remaining 1 to Jamat-E-Islami (JEI). Out of the total MPs interviewed, 26 belonged to the Fifth Parliament and 31 to the Seventh Parliament. Of the 57 MPs, 53 were elected from the reserved seats while 4 were elected from the general seats by direct popular votes.

Women MPs have expressed their opinions very candidly. 57.89% Members have shown their despair on the overall women's participation in Bangladesh politics. 89.47% of the respondents have positive impression about the impact of the reserved system. 87.72% MPs said reservation should continue. 68% of them mentioned that the number of the reserved seats should be 64, one for each district. 92% of the respondents demanded that the Eighth Parliament should take immediate initiative to amend the Constitution for continuation of the reserved seats. 66% of the Members said women MPs should be elected by direct popular votes. Overwhelming majority, 94.74% of the respondents were of the opinion that political parties should allow special quota for women seeking nomination for election from general constituencies. 63.16% of the respondents mentioned that political parties should nominate at least 10% candidates from the women community. Women MPs have recognized that they have earned a lot of experiences by working with parliamentary committees. 69.23% of them replied, 'Female Chairpersonship is required for more dynamism and more transparency in the functioning of the Committees'. Although majority MPs of all parties (59.26% of AL, 76% of BNP and 75% of JP) have expressed the view that their local party leaders were positive and cooperative with them yet a good number of MP (29.63% of AL and 16% of BNP and 25% of JP) have confessed that their local leaders were jealous and non-cooperative. With regard to the cooperation extended by the fellow party male MPs in accomplishing their responsibilities, 29.93% women MPs of AL said, 'excellent', 66.66% 'moderate' and 7.41% 'not satisfactory'. The BNP

female MPs' opinion was slightly different. 52% of them said, 'excellent', 40% 'moderate' and 8% 'not satisfactory'. Among 4 of the JP Members, 3 replied as 'moderate' and the remaining 1 'excellent'. The lone JEI Member answered that she was cooperated by her party Members moderately. 36.84% women Members mentioned that, 'future of democracy in our country is bright', 63.16% Members said, 'there are impediments but they are recoverable'. But none of them think that, Bangladesh's democracy has 'no future at all'. The expressed views of the MPs demonstrate that to majority of them (63.16%) the future of democracy is problematic but the problems are not unsolvable. Most of the Members (85.96%) are 'moderately satisfied' on their own performances. Only 8.77% think they are 'very much satisfied' while the remaining 5.26% Members mention that they are 'not at all satisfied'.

On the basis of the study findings some recommendations and suggestions have been made which may be considered as important and relevant to increase women's participation in the Parliament and decision making bodies. Suggestions and recommendations are: (a) the reservation should continue to facilitate more women participation in the parliamentary politics of Bangladesh. (b) The Eighth Parliament should immediately enact an amendment to the Constitution to effect the continuation of the reservation system. (c) Political parties should preserve the policy of reservation system for women in the Parliament and encourage them to take active part in the politics in larger number. (d) The number of women reserved seats should be increased to 64 and MPs in the reserved seats should be directly elected. (e) Women MPs should be allowed to chair at least 25% of the parliamentary Committees. (f) Women MPs should be supported with orientation training about women's viewpoints and should be given opportunities to visit the Parliaments of the developed countries. (g) The Article 70 of the Constitution should be relaxed so that MPs can express their views and cast their votes independently. (h) At least 10% nominations should be given to women by the political parties to contest for the general seats. (i) Women should be mobilized in different organizations throughout the country and their organizations should take fresh initiatives to establish strong structural network from urban to rural areas in order to pressurize political parties to give priority to the women issues

Women of Bangladesh are getting awakening; they cannot be deprived any more of their equal rights in all formal political institutions including the Parliament. Giving equal share to women in the decision-making bodies and recognizing its importance is, therefore, fundamental to the existence and working of true democracy. It should not be forgotten that 'Democracy minus women is not a democracy'.

CHAPTER ONE

01. Introduction

Bangladesh is a backward and disaster trodden land and is populated predominately by Muslims. Nevertheless, its people have elected two women leaders to the position of the country's Prime Minister. The autocrats ruled the country for a long time but the people did not hesitate to demonstrate their heart-felt love for democracy by launching blood-tinged struggles against the autocracy and the military regimes. After a historic and glorious victory against the autocracy in 1990, the sky of Bangladesh's nascent democracy is still overcast with darkness and confrontational politics. Political parties hardly practice democratic norms and values within their rank and file.

Institutionalization of politics is still a popular cry. In this dismal situation, Bangladesh has again shown its strength by three consecutive transfers of power under a self-invented system of caretaker government. Despite its crises and dilemmas Bangladesh has experienced a decade of uninterrupted democratic rule. But various social forces, including women, are deprived of the fruits of democracy.

Major areas of curiosity of Bangladesh democracy are leadership quality and position of women in the greater political arena and in the society.

1.01 Politics, Democracy and Women: Scholars' Viewpoints

Women operate in a public context different from that of men, and their perception of 'politics' is also different from the male view. The Collins English Dictionary defines that 'politics' refers to the 'complex or aggregate of relationships of *men* in society, especially those involving authority or power'. A US women's group defined politics from a wider perspective in 1969: 'our politics begin with our feelings...the political unit in which we can discover, share and explore our feelings is the small group. Raising our collective consciousness is not a process that begins and ends, but is continuous and necessary given the enormous pressure placed on us everywhere to deny our own perceptions' (Garrett 1992: 119-120).

Since 1960s, feminists and feminist political theorists have been claiming that 'the personal is political'. They claim that 'domestic' life has to be acknowledged as being deeply political. They argue that the gender division of housework tasks, duties and responsibilities in the family affect the 'political' by restricting women in their participation in public life (Phillips 1991: 85).

Radical feminists put forward series of charges against democracy. For feminists, democracy is something which, as a matter of unfortunate fact, has

failed to deliver on its promises to women (Mendus 1994: 208). Another charge against democracy is that, 'As a faith, democracy was always a false faith, and its prophets (including nearly all the major political philosophers of the past two hundred years) are now exposed as false prophets' (Mendus 1994: 208). One of the feminist writers claims, 'for feminists, democracy has never existed; women never have been and still are not admitted as full and equal members of any country known as a "democracy"' (Pateman 1989: 210).

By conceding the unequal treatment by democracy towards women, the democratic theorists emphasize that a very important rationale for a democratic order is 'its ability to accommodate variety and criticism'. E. M. Foster once called for 'two cheers for democracy', 'one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism' (Mendus 1994: 216). John Stuart Mill begins his theory of democracy from 'recognition of difference'. He understood democracy not as a state, but as a process. He recognizes and emphasizes the priority of difference over equality. Modern democratic theorists recognize that 'equality must be attained without the elimination of difference' (Mendus 1994: 216). To attain this equality, democracy should take special initiatives. But this is not a 'special treatment for women...rather an end to the existing system of special treatment for men', '...what already exists is a case of preferential treatment for men' (Mendus 1994: 217-218).

A host of political scientists, researchers, UN bodies and different development organizations and institutions have explained the relationships between democracy, development and women's participation and many of them have laid emphasis on the importance of women's role in a democratic process.

Why should more women enter politics? Why are they considered as better agents for good governance? European Network of Experts has observed that: 'A balanced representation of women and men at all levels of decision-making guarantees better government. Because of their history as a group, women have their own and unique perspective. They have different values and ideas and behave differently. Increased participation of women in decision-making will create a new culture and shed new light on how power should be exercised. Women attach great importance to the quality of contact between people. They are less individualistic than men' (1994: 8). Stacey and Price concluded their study with the remarks that: 'if women wish to make changes in the societies they live in, they must seek and achieve power positions. It is essential that women should enter the political arena since the societies are all dominated by men, for men certainly cannot be relied upon to initiate or carry through the necessary changes' (quoted in Lister 1997: 154).

Theorists have pointed that women have specific interests, different from and potentially in conflict with those of men. These interests need to be represented by women themselves in the decision-making process and in the pivotal institutions of the polity. Indirect representation of their interests by others is not sufficient. Women's perspectives need to be articulated directly in political debate and decision-making (Phillips 1995: 102).

Women's participation in politics has also been analyzed from the perspective of Women in Development (WID). Famous economist Ester Boserup first identified and critically examined the position of women in the developmental efforts. Boserup argues that women are 'left out' of the modern development process remaining in the 'traditional, subsistence' sector while men move into the modern sector. She regards women's low levels of participation in the 'modern' economic sector as being 'bad' for development as well as bad for women themselves (quoted in Charles 1993: 166). So to change the position of women and disseminate the fruits of development initiatives among the womenfolk, more female should be allowed to take positions in the decision-making bodies.

It has also been observed that women's role in the local politics is very significant and they have special interests in local government. Phillips remarked that, 'local politics is more open to women as *activists* as well as to women as elected representatives'. The British Conservative Party's handbook says: 'Women are extremely well equipped for local government. They have a vested interest in, and immediate knowledge of the schools, services, housing, care of children, and the environment, which are the responsibilities of the local government' (Phillips 1996: 112).

Bangladeshi scholars and experts have examined the importance of women's participation from various viewpoints. Women's increasing representation and participation is required because: (1) It is a question of democracy and equality as well as a question of civil rights. The demand for proportional representation of women in the politics is unavoidable. (2) Women's insignificant presence in the politics raises questions about the legitimacy of democratic process and decision-making authorities. (3) Women are well informed and experienced about their basic problems and needs. But they will be deprived of equal shares if they are not properly represented in the politics. (4) Women's increased participation in politics and decision-making bodies will facilitate more changes and open up more spaces for them. (5) And finally, for efficient and maximum utilization of human resources increased numbers of women should be allowed in politics (Chowdhury 1994: 21).

In the observations and viewpoints presented in this section, we find how the scholars and researchers have laid their concentration on the importance of the women's participation in politics and democratic process. We know that political participation is two fold: formal and non-formal. Parliament is one of the major formal political institutions. The main thrust of this study is to focus and analyze the various aspects of women's participation in the Bangladesh Parliament, officially known as *Jatiya Sangsad*.

1.02 Woman, Parliament and the Constitution of Bangladesh

The Constitution framers of Bangladesh were very concerned about the interests of the backward classes and societies of the new state. Historically the state of women's participation in Bangladesh politics, compared to that of men, was very marginal, though women played a significant role in the liberation struggle of Bangladesh. They were freedom fighters, victims of rape by Pakistani soldiers and collaborators; they lost their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons and daughters in the liberation war. It has been reported that 'nearly 30,000 Bangladeshi women were raped by Pakistani soldiers in their supposed mission to populate this wing of the nation with pure Muslims' (Monsoor 1999: 122). There are villages in Bangladesh where almost all men were killed and the women were left to carry on the burden of life. These villages are called "widow's village" or "survivor's village" (Chowdhury 2001: 22). They were not only the victims; they played a vital role as armed freedom fighters and organizers of the liberation movement as well. The liberation war was a 'united struggle of both Bangali men and women—their joint efforts and fears. Bangali girls and women had flocked to training camps in India to learn guerrilla warfare, first aid and all things necessary to fight a war. Many women freedom fighters were injured or martyred and numerous women helped feed and hide members of the *Mukti Bahini* and their arms' (Khan 2001: 51).

To recognize women's role in the liberation war and to increase their role in the politics the Constitution framers have maintained constitutional provisions for increased women's participation in politics, especially in the Parliament. Clause 3 of Article 65 of the Constitution reads: 'Until the dissolution of Parliament occurring next after the expiration of the period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution there shall be reserved fifteen seats exclusively for women members, who shall be elected according to law by the members aforesaid (elected MPs).' Under this provision, in the First Parliament (1973-75), 15 women MPs were elected by the MPs elected from general seats. In 1978, the period of reservation was extended to further 15 years and the number of seats was increased from 15 to 30. After that, 30 women MPs were elected in both the Second (1979-82) and the Third (1986-87) Parliaments. The period of reservation of 30 seats for women in the Parliament expired on 16th December 1987. As a result, no woman MP was elected from the reserved seats

in the Fourth (1988-90) Parliament. In 1990, the 10th Amendment to the Constitution re-inserted clause 3 to Article 65 of the Constitution, which provides 30 reserved seats 'for women for a further period of 10 years from the first sitting of the next Parliament'. Following this Amendment, 30 women MPs from the reserved seats were elected in all the Fifth (1990-95), Sixth (1996) and Seventh (1996-2001) Parliaments. This provision of reserved seats for women in the Parliament expired in April 2001. But the tenure of the Seventh Parliament was completed without passing any constitutional amendment bill for continuation of reserved seats in the Parliament. Therefore, there will be no women MPs in the Eighth Parliament from the reserved category

Owing to this provision, women have gathered experiences as Members of Parliaments. But questions have been raised from many corners about how far this reservation has served the women community. It has been said that, 'it was simply another means to increase the powers of the ruling party' (White 1992). The main question was raised against the electoral process of the reserved seats. Women's organizations and civil society placed their demand to the effect that the Constitution should be amended introducing the provisions of direct electoral system and increased number of reserved seats. Seminar, symposium, discussion meetings were arranged to sharpen as well as mobilize the public opinion and pressurize the political parties to enact the required amendment to the Constitution.

In 1997, a female Member of Jatiyo Party (JP), Rabia Bhuiyan, presented a Constitution Amendment Bill in the Private Members Bill Committee. The main features of the Bill were: (1) Parliament shall consist of not less than one hundred female Members. (2) Female Members will be elected by direct election. (3) EC shall, out of three hundred constituencies, specify one hundred constituencies for females. (4) Political parties shall nominate one hundred of its nominees from among the females. In 2000, to amend the Constitution a draft Bill was prepared and presented to the government by the *Bangladesh Mahila Parishad*. The features of their Bill were: (1) There shall be four hundred and fifty seats in the Parliament. (2) One hundred and fifty (one-third) seats will be reserved for women. (3) Female candidates in these seats will be elected by direct election. (3) Every two general seats will be considered as one reserved seat. After presenting the Bill the *Mahila Parishad* took various programs to gain popular support in favor of the Bill and pressurize the government and opposition parties. Pressures were so mounted that even the major political parties could not avoid the issue. Ruling party Awami League (AL) and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) presented two constitutional amendment Bills in the Parliament. But none of the Bills maintained any provision to increase the number of reserved seats and to introduce a direct election process. The situation hurt and demoralized the

public opinion and it became clear that the positions of the main political parties were against the sentiment of the women organizations and the civil society. In fact, political parties gave nothing but lip services to the demand of the civil society.

1.03 Women Parliamentarians in Bangladesh: An Overview

Jatiya Sangsad of Bangladesh is by any standard a male-dominated political institution. Women have a very marginal position in the Parliament though they constitute about half of the population as well as voters of the country. Since 1991, two women leaders had been working as the Leader and the Opposition Leader of the Parliament. But their prominent presence could not hide the marginal position of women in Bangladesh politics and in the Parliament. The First Parliament of Bangladesh started functioning with 15 women MPs elected from the reserved seats. No woman was elected from general seats in the First Parliament. All women MPs of the First Parliament were elected from the ruling party AL. The Second Parliament of Bangladesh first ever got two of its women Members elected from the general seats¹. However, they were elected in by-elections. Here we find a coincidence with the British Parliament. In the British Parliament first woman Member was also elected in a by-election in 1919

Table 1: Women Members in Bangladesh Parliament 1973-2001

Parliament	No. of Reserved Seats(R)	Women MPs from General Seats (G)	Women MPs from AL	Women MPs from BNP	Women MPs from JP	Women MPs from JEI	Total Women MPs
1 st Parliament (1973-75)	15	-	15 (R)	-	-	-	15
2 nd Parliament (1979-82)	30	2	-	30+2 (R+G)	-	-	32
3 rd Parliament (1986-87)	30	5	1	-	30+4 (R+G)	-	35
4 th Parliament (1988-90)	^	4	-	-	4 (G)	-	4
5 th Parliament (1991-95)	30	4	3 (G)	28+1 (G+R)	-	2 (R)	34
6 th Parliament (1996-96)	30	3	-	30+3 (G+R)	-	-	33
7 th Parliament (1996-2001)	30	8	27+3 (R+G)	3 (G)	3+2 (R+G)		38

(Radice *et al.* 1990: 38). In the Second Parliament, 30 women Members were also elected from the reserved seats category and all of them were elected from the then ruling party BNP. In the Third Parliament, 5 women Members were elected from the general seats. 1 of them belonged to AL and the remaining 4 were adhered to the then ruling party, JP. JP also secured 30 seats from the reserved seats category. In the Fourth Parliament, total number of women MPs was 4 and all of them were elected from the ruling party, JP. In this Parliament, no woman was elected from the reserved seats because time for reservation expired before this Parliament. In the Fifth Parliament, 4 women Members were elected from the general seats, 3 of them from AL and 1 from BNP. BNP, the ruling party, secured 28 reserved seats and the remaining 2 of this category were given to Jamat-E-Islami (JEI), the then ally of BNP. Although the Sixth Parliament survived for the shortest period in the parliamentary history of Bangladesh, it also elected 30 MPs from the reserved seats. 3 other women were elected from the general seats. Total number of women MPs in this parliament was 33. All of them were elected from BNP. In the Seventh Parliament, we find highest number of women Members, 38. Out of 38, 8 were elected from the general seats, 3 of them from AL, 3 from BNP and the remaining 2 from JP. From the 30 reserved seats, the ruling party AL secured 27 and the remaining 3 were given to JP for its support to form the government.

Two major points may be noted from the above discussion. (1) There is a positive trend among the women leaders to be elected from the general seats and (2) the majority parties have used reserved seats as a means of securing optimum number to form government or to confirm two-third majority in the House.

1.04 Objectives of the Study

In all Parliaments of Bangladesh (except the Fourth and the Sixth), women MPs worked with their male counterparts. They have gathered experiences of parliamentary practices and procedures through their participation. They know how the Parliament works, how their male colleagues react on women issues in the Parliament, where and how women MPs face problems, how an indirect electoral process has undermined their positions, etc. As women MPs have experienced the very core issues, their opinions on these issues are very vital and significantly important.

The main thrusts and objectives of the study are:

- to know the impacts of reserved seats in the Parliament;
- to know the experiences of the women MPs of the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments;
- to know the extent of importance the gender issues have received from the women MPs in the Bangladesh Parliaments;

- to know the stand of the women MPs of the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments on reservation, electoral process, size of constituency, etc.;
- to identify the problems of raising issues on women in the Parliament;
- to know the level and extent of cooperation women MPs received from their male counterparts;
- to get the suggestions of women MPs about the initiatives taken by various donor agencies in respect of strengthening the Parliament; and
- to identify the problems of women's participation in the Parliament.

1.05 Specific Investigation of the Study

This study is undertaken to make a particular investigation into the following basic questions:

- a. What is the social, economic and political background of the women MPs of the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments?
- b. What have been the performances of women MPs in the parliamentary process of Bangladesh?
- c. How far have the women MPs been able to raise the female issues in the Parliaments?
- d. What has been the role of the women MPs in the functioning of the Parliamentary Standing Committees?

1.06 Rationale of the Study

Democracy is very popular in Bangladesh as an ideology and a political system. But for many reasons, democratic institutions have not yet fully developed in the country. Parliament is a key political institution but unfortunately it could not function uninterruptedly. Making the Parliament effective is a difficult job. It needs political consensus, proper political leadership. Also in-depth studies on parliamentary process can attribute a lot in making the Parliament an effective body. It is evident that for successful functioning of the Parliament in Bangladesh, we need a matured parliamentary culture. Without ensuring women's role in the Parliament and in the democratic process, there can hardly be any significant political development. This in-depth study on women MPs will provide necessary information and analyses, which are expected to be helpful for strengthening democracy and building democratic institutions in Bangladesh.

The study is planned to show how the reservation system has served women community in terms of development, women's participation in politics and in the Parliament. The study will provide important suggestions for the government, political parties, donor agencies and women organizations and women workers. This may help take decisions regarding reservation system, number of reserved seats, electoral process and relevant issues. The study will also shed light on how women MPs have worked in the House, Committees and

the parliamentary party meetings; how they have enjoyed the parliamentary privileges and how they have practiced other parliamentary procedures.

1.07 Methodology

The study is based on data collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was both close and open-ended. The open-end questionnaire was used so that the respondents could express their views on different issues. Along with a trained Investigators Team, the author himself has interviewed the respondents. Because of his personal interview with the women MPs, the author has encompassed areas, which were not possible to cover in the questionnaire.

Besides primary data, collected from face to face interview, materials have also been gleaned from the relevant secondary literature and research reports. Especially, the author has consulted the recent articles, commentary views on 'Women and Parliament' and relevant issues. Information collected has been crosschecked and have been processed and presented in the text and in the tabular and graphic form.

A number of difficulties and constraints were encountered during the interview phase. MPs were extremely busy and were in time constraints. During our interview, from May 20 to July 31 (2001), they were highly busy with the last session of the Parliament (specially Members of the Seventh Parliament), constituency problems, preparation for nomination seeking and party activities. So several visits were required to have an appointment with almost all of them. Extensive travels, frequent changes in the appointments and bad communication and rough weather were encountered. However, women MPs were very cooperative, spontaneous and cordial when they were interviewed.

1.08 Organization of the Study

The study report is divided into five chapters. Chapter one provides a conceptual framework and an overview of the situation of women Members in the Bangladesh Parliament along with the objectives, rationale and methodology of the study. An attempt has been made in chapter two to discuss the socio-political background and selection criteria of the women Members of the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments. It also deals with the breakdown of the respondents and areas covered in the questionnaire. Chapter three presents a complete and detailed account of the findings of the study. Some recommendations have been made on the basis of the study findings in chapter four. Finally, chapter five provides conclusion and deals with the role of women parliamentarians in the process of strengthening democracy in Bangladesh.

CHAPTER TWO

02. Background

Socio-political and organizational backgrounds essentially influence the overall performance of any leader or Member of Parliament. Information about the backgrounds of the female Members of the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments has been gathered through the questionnaire. The relevant secondary materials have also been used to complete the study.

2.01 Breakdown of the Respondents

In the Fifth Parliament, women MPs were mainly elected from BNP and in the Seventh Parliament most of the women MPs were elected from the ruling party AL. A total 57 women MPs have been interviewed for the present research from May 20, 2001 to July 31, 2001. Out of 57 women MPs, 27 belonged to AL, 25 were adhered to BNP while 4 belonged to JP and the remaining 1 to JEI. Out of 27 women MPs from AL, 25 were elected from the reserved seats and 2 from the general seats. Out of 25 female MPs from BNP, 24 were elected from the reserved seats and 1 from the general seats. Among the 4 JP women Members, 3 were elected from the reserved seats and 1 from the general seats. The lone JEI Member was elected from the reserved seats category.

Table 2: Breakdown of the women MPs interviewed: party position

Party	Fifth Parliament		Seventh Parliament		Total	Percentage
	G	R	G	R		
AL	1	-	1	25	27	47.37
BNP	-	24	1	-	25	43.86
JP	-	-	1	3	4	7.02
JEI	-	1	-	-	1	1.75
Total	1	25	3	28	57	100.00

Out of the total MPs interviewed, 26 belonged to the Fifth Parliament and 31 to the Seventh Parliament. From those who have been interviewed, 53 were elected from the reserved seats while 4 were elected by direct popular votes. Hopefully, the opinions collected from the women members will reflect the existing political trends and various dimensions of reserved and general seats.

Table 3: Breakdown of the MPs interviewed: electoral process

Electoral Process	Fifth Parliament	Seventh Parliament	Total	Percentage
Directly Elected	1	3	4	7.02
Indirectly Elected	25	28	53	92.98
Total	26	31	57	100.00

2.02 The Summary of the Issues Covered by the Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the study covered a wide areas ranging from social and political backgrounds to constituency related issues. The areas covered in the questionnaire are as follows:

- a. Social and Political Backgrounds of the Women MPs
- b. Criteria of Selection
- c. Women's Role in Bangladesh Politics
- d. Role of Women MPs in the House
- e. Importance Attached to Women Interests
- f. Reserved Seat System, Number of Seats and Electoral Process
- g. Role in Law Making
- h. Performance in the Parliamentary Committees
- i. Expectation of the Parties
- j. Cooperation Received from Male MPs, Ministers and Family Members
- k. Opinion on Local Administration and Constituency
- l. Politics of Local Government
- m. Parliamentary Privileges, Salary and Benefits
- n. Strengthening Democracy and Parliamentary Process in Bangladesh
- o. Evaluation of self Performance

2.03 Socio-Political Background of the MPs

Socio-economic and political background is one of the major factors that strongly determine the behavior of political personalities. How will a leader present herself/himself, behave and interact with the masses depends mostly on her/his background. Bernard Levin once remarked about Tory MPs of British Parliament that, 'many new Tory MPs look, sound and behave like used-car salesmen' (Radice *et al.* 1990: 36).

Education is one of the essential factors that develop the values, culture and human qualities. A truly educated leader can influence policy matters in favor of national development and greater interest of the country selflessly. The questionnaire of this study was designed in a manner so that institutional and educational backgrounds of the women Members could be found out. Among the 27 AL Members interviewed, 14 have masters and 9 have bachelor degrees. 3 of them passed Secondary School Certificate (S.S.C.) Examination and 1 Higher Secondary Certificate (H.S.C) Examination. Out of 25 BNP lawmakers, 11 have masters and 8 have bachelor degrees. The remaining 5 passed the H.S.C. examination and 4 managed to obtain S.S.C.. 2 of JP Members have masters and 2 have bachelor degrees. The lone JEI Member has a bachelor degree.

Table 4: Educational background of the different party MPs

Degree	AL	BNP	JP	JEI	Total
Secondary School	3 (11.11%)	3 (12%)	-	-	6
Higher Secondary	1 (3.70%)	5 (20%)	-	-	6
Bachelor	9 (33.33%)	8(32%)	2 (50%)	1 (100%)	20
Masters	14 (51.86%)	9 (36%)	2 (50%)	-	25
Total	27 (100%)	25 (100%)	4 (100%)	1 (100%)	57

Out of 57 Members interviewed, 31 MPs permanently live in the Dhaka city. 13 of them belonged to AL, 13 were adhered to BNP while 4 belonged to JP and the remaining 1 to JEI. 24 Members usually live in district towns. 13 of them belonged to AL and 11 to BNP. 1 AL Member lives in a thana town and 1 BNP lawmaker permanently lives in a village.

Table 5: Women MPs usually live in

Party	Dhaka	District Town	Thana Town	Village	Total
AL	13 (41.94%)	13 (54.17%)	1 (100%)	-	27
BNP	13 (41.94%)	11 (45.83%)	-	1 (100%)	25
JP	4 (12.90%)	-	-	-	4
JEI	1 (3.22%)	-	-	-	1
Total	31 (54.39%)	24 (42.11%)	1 (1.75%)	1 (1.75%)	57

Women Members entered the Parliament from different occupational backgrounds. 24 of them were housewives. Among the housewives 7 belonged to AL, 14 to BNP, 1 was adhered to JEI and the remaining 1 to JP. 16 Members came from teaching backgrounds. They were teachers of different colleges and schools. 11 of this category were AL Members, 4 BNP and 1 JP lawmakers. 7 MPs had the background of private service and NGO activities. 5 of them were adhered to AL and 2 to BNP. Only 4 women Members entered into the Parliament from full time political background. 1 from this category was AL Member and 3 BNP Members. 5 Members had the business background. 3 of this profession belonged to AL and the remaining 2 to BNP. 1 Member of JP came from legal profession and another was a journalist by profession.

Table 6: Occupational background of Women MPs

Profession	AL	BNP	JP	JEI	Total
Housewife	7	14	1	1	23
Professor/ Teaching	11	4	1	-	16
Private Service/NGO Background	5	2	-	-	7
Full Time Politics	1	3	-	-	4
Business	3	2	-	-	5
Advocates/Journalist	-	-	2	-	2
Total	27	25	4	1	57

Though women Members came from various occupational backgrounds, most of them had considerable political experiences. Some of them were in the leadership position of the political parties and were associated with socio-cultural and women organizations. Among the 27 AL Members, 5 were simply supporters of the *Bangladesh Chatra League* (student front of AL) during their student life, 2 had involvement with social organizations, 7 were district level leaders of the women/labor fronts of the party, 3 were in the central leadership positions of the women/labor fronts, 2 had experiences of leading the AL in the district level, 2 were leaders of central level in the AL and 6 (22.22%) were not at all associated with party politics. Out of 25 BNP women Members, 7 had experiences of social organizations, 5 were leaders of district level women/labor fronts, only 1 was in the central level leadership position of the front organization, 2 were leaders of the two district branches of the BNP, 3 were in the central committee of the party and 7 (28%) had no involvement with party politics. 2 JP Members had experience of leading their party in the district level, 1 was a member of the central committee and 1 came with non-party background. The lone JEI Member was not directly involved with party politics before entering into the Parliament.

Table 7: Previous involvement with party politics

Present Party	Was supporter or Activist of Student Front only	Only Involved with Social Organizations	Dist. Level Women/Labor Front	Central Level Women/Labor Front	Dist. Level Party	Central Level of the Party	No Involvement with Party Politics	Total
AL	5	2	7	3	2	2	6	27
BNP	-	7	5	1	2	3	7	25
JP	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	4
JEI	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Total	5	9	12	4	6	6	15	57

2.04 Processes and Criteria of Selection

According to the Clause 3 of Article 65 of the Constitution, women Members in the reserved seats would be ‘elected according to law by the Members aforesaid’ i.e. by the MPs elected from the general seats. The very essence of these words is that the election process is indirect. The concerned law (Representation of the People (Seats for Women Members) Order (Amendment) Ordinance, 1991) has given some guidelines to accomplish this election. But beyond this law, in case of both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments, the parties, respectively BNP and AL took some steps in the process. Turning to Members from candidates, all aspirants had to go through a set of formal requirements. There was much in common in the processes of both the parties. What are the steps in the process of selection?

After winning in the general election, the majority parties sought applications from the aspirant women candidates to be elected in the reserved seats. In both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments, many aspirants submitted their applications. Among the applicants were senior party leaders, eminent film artists, social and cultural personalities, relatives or wives of martyred leaders. In case of the Seventh Parliament, AL received 503 applications. BNP received, in the Fifth Parliament, 350 applications. After a primary selection, candidates were asked to face an interview board. The board usually tries to justify her candidature as to why she should be given the party nomination, as to what her contribution to party politics was, how she would manage her constituency, etc. Though a high-level interview board was formed, the top two leaders, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina finalized ultimate party selections respectively in the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments. After party nomination, names of the candidates were submitted formally to the EC. The EC officially declared an expiry date for withdrawal of nominations. At the expiry of the withdrawal date, the EC declared the result. The EC then announced the names through gazette notification giving them legal status.

These were the formal procedures and steps; but what was the basic deciding factor; on what consideration was a particular candidate chosen from among the several aspirants? What were the considerations that moved the leaders to select a particular female candidate for a particular constituency?

We find a strong relevance of Linda’s observation in the selection criteria of women MPs, especially in the Seventh Parliament. Linda Richter observed, “Among the factors which enable women to reach leadership positions are elite status, high levels of female participation in the movements struggling for

independence, and crucially, links to politically prominent male relatives, often accompanied by their martyrdom, e.g. their assassination”(quoted in Waylen 1996: 12). The ruling party AL elected 27 women MPs in the Seventh Parliament. There were 3 major considerations of the party’s high command to elect these 27 Members. (1) Martyr and Affected Family: AL chose some MPs from martyred and affected families. By electing this MPs AL tried to compensate and commemorate those leaders who sacrificed their lives to the cause of the freedom of the country in 1971 and who died for the party and democratic struggle in various stages. Their wives, daughters and close relatives were made Members of Parliament. (2) Political and Personal Consideration: A good number of women MPs, at least 10, were elected for political and personal status and consideration. Some women leaders, who were very much active and holding leadership positions of the party and affiliated organizations but failed to secure any seat in the election, were elected MPs from the reserved seats. On the other hand, a few women MPs were elected for their social status and for their deep personal relationship with the party’s high ups. (3) Minimizing Party Groupings: At least, 6 women Members were chosen to minimize party groupings at the district level. Posts of women MPs had been used as fillers to bridge the gaps between the leaders and the party groupings.

Some considerations about the selection criteria of BNP lawmakers may be mentioned. (1) Traditional Political Families: BNP elected some women Members from renowned political families. Wives, daughters, daughters-in-law and close relatives of former political figures were accommodated in the politics by giving them women parliamentary membership. (2) Leftist Orientation: BNP elected a few Members from the women leaders who were involved with leftist politics. (4) Personal Consideration: BNP high command chose some Members who had deep personal relationship with the party high command. Most of them were from rich and ‘high-status’ families. In the Fifth Parliament a few women Members who were in the good book of former President Ziaur Rahman (founder of BNP) were elected. By and large BNP’s broad viewpoint was to expand the party’s support base by ‘distributing’ women memberships among the like-minded women leaders.

CHAPTER THREE

03. Major Findings of the Study

The collected data reveal many interesting insights about the working of the women Members in the Parliament, in the Committees and in their respective parties. Some important suggestions have been received on strengthening parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. The data have been presented in the tabular, charts and graphic forms to make the findings more interesting and analytical.

3.01 New Faces in the Parliament

A scholar has described the word ‘MP’ as ‘magic word’. After a well-trodden way, a person gets the right to put the magic words after her/his name. It is said that ‘The road to Parliament is awash with the blood, sweat and tears of those who have made it—and of those who haven’t’. Becoming a Member from reserved seats in the Bangladesh Parliament is not as troublesome as it is in case of the general seats. Lobbying, family connections and blessings of the party’s high up—these are main criteria of selecting women Members from the reserved seats.

In both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments increasing number of aspirants declared their candidature and faced the selection board. Both BNP and AL selected maximum number of new faces. In the Seventh Parliament, out of 30 reserved seats, AL candidates filled 27 and 26 of them were newcomers in the Parliament. The remaining 3 MPs from JP entered the Parliament for the second time. In the Seventh Parliament, total number (reserved+general) of women Members was 38 and 78.9% of them (total 30, 27 reserved + 3 general) were new faces.

3.02 Bitter Experience of Women MPs

Parliamentary life of women MPs elected from the reserved seats was never a bed of roses. During the autocratic rule of General Ershad, a political weekly marked women MPs of the Third Parliament as ‘thirty set of ornaments’. Under Ershad rule, the whole Parliament was used just as a rubber stamp and the aforesaid comment on women MPs got tremendous popularity. After the step-down of Ershad, a fair and free general election took place and the Fifth Parliament was established. In its very first session, the Fifth Parliament passed the twelfth amendment to the Constitution reinstalling parliamentary form of government and enhanced the image of the Parliament. The Parliament got its image and prestige, two women were elected as the Leader and the Opposition Leader of both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments but abusive behavior

towards the women MPs, especially from their male counterparts, did not stop. It has been reflected in the observation of a woman MP of the Fifth Parliament from BNP who observed, 'We were nothing but bonus to our male colleagues'. The situation changed in the later years of the Seventh Parliament but their initial experience was not sweet at all. "Always we were targets of some defamatory comments, we were called 'rented MPs", said one female Member of the Seventh Parliament. Another female MP of the Seventh Parliament expressed her bitter experience in the following words: "We were newcomers, things were unfamiliar and far away from us, so we were bound to imbibe insulting comments within ourselves. Some of our party MPs called us as 'MPs of five thousand taka'; some people said, 'Oh women, they are queer MPs". A number of women MPs of the Seventh Parliament were of the opinion that the situation ultimately changed because of two factors: (1) Prime Minister herself raised strong voice against this sort of attitude. (2) By their experience, hard work and active role in party politics and constituency, women MPs themselves had changed their positions. 'Now we say loudly', said one female MP, 'We are not ornaments, we are rather pride of the party (*'amra alonker noi barong daler ahongker'*)'.

3.03 Opinion on Women's Role in Politics

Women's participation in Bangladesh politics is very meager and marginal. It is again the reflection of their overall powerlessness. But the women activists, civil society and many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) are trying their best to alter this situation. The Union Parishad (UP) election of 1997 has made some positive and encouraging impacts on women's active participation in Bangladesh politics. The respondents have been found to place secluded and contradictory opinions in response to the question: 'How do you feel about the present state of women's participation in Bangladesh politics?' 57.89% Members have shown their despair on the overall women's participation. 'We are victims of a vicious circle; male domination, money, muscle and *mastan* determine the course of politics, women are helpless', said a disappointed woman Member. 44.11% respondents were found hoping against hope. According to their perception, women are coming up. "It is true male politicians are making politics a 'dirty game', but if we want to bring any change, women need to be more active in politics", commented an optimistic woman MP. 'What are the impediments to increased women participation in politics?' A top chart could be designed on the basis of their identification of impediments as follows:

- a. Women's economic dependence (38.60%)
- b. Masculinity (22.80%)
- c. Lack of education (17.54%)
- d. Threats from fundamentalist politics (14.04%)
- e. Backward social values (7.02%)

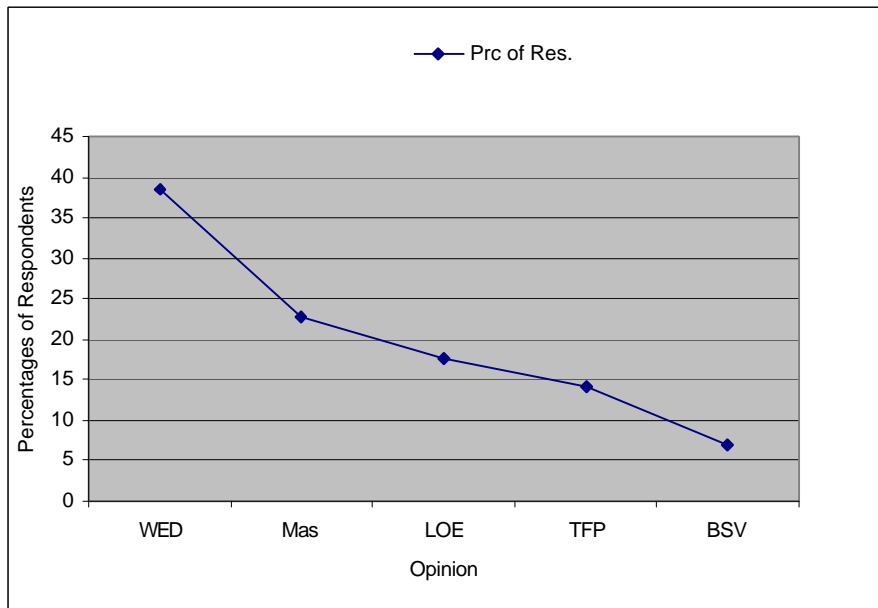


Figure 1: Opinion on impediments to increased women's participation in politics
(WED: Women's Economic Dependence; Mas: Masculinity; LOE: Lack of Education
TFP: Threats from Fundamentalist Politics; BSV: Backward Social Values)

Majority of the Members mentioned that until and unless women would be financially self-reliant their grounding in politics would not be possible.

3.04 Interesting Discussion in the House

The Parliament is considered as one of the greatest debating forums. Leo Amery wrote in 1947 that 'the main task of Parliament is still what it was when first summoned, not to legislate or govern, but to secure full discussion and ventilation of all matters' (quoted in Griffith and Ryle 1989: 6). By ensuring discussions, lively debates, putting questions and by giving thoughtful and authentic answers the Parliament can be made the most attractive and meaningful institution of a nation. The genial and witty discussions ensure that the government and ministers are liable to the masses and the opposition is questioning the policies and decisions of the government on behalf of the electorate. Parliamentary discussions in the House again reflect the individual intellectual height, depth, future plans of the parliamentarians and standard of the political culture of nation.

The role of the Bangladesh Parliament as a debating forum is gloomy and its ventilation functions are almost totally ineffective. Grievances and questions of the opposition and backbenchers are not cared and resolved here; rather these are being frozen within the four walls of the House. The House has not yet displayed any remarkable, in-depth issue-based parliamentary debates. Rhetoric

speeches, purposive introduction of the matters and exchange of hot and un-parliamentary abusive words—these are the salient features of the parliamentary debates in the Bangladesh Parliament.

Despite all these, women MPs took active interest in some matters discussed in the House. The respondents were asked about what kind of discussion in the House was more interesting to them. 70% respondents of the Seventh Parliament replied, it was the ‘Prime Minister’s Question Hour’. To 60% respondents of the Fifth Parliament it was ‘parliamentary debates’.

Table 8: Most interesting discussion in the House

Parliament	Debates	PM’s Question Hour	Budget	Women Issues	Others
Fifth	60%	-	20%	12%	8%
Seventh	18.52%	70.37%	3.70%	7.41%	-

3.05 Working Environment

Overall working environment for women in the Bangladesh Parliament is not friendly at all. Even in the British Parliament, women Members are facing anti-female environment. Barbara Castle, a former British MP found, ‘there were no women’s lavatories or changing rooms available... the House of Commons was rather like a male club.’ According to Dalemont, a British researcher, women MPs face constant criticism, no matter what they do. Their clothes, hair, speech, lifestyle, and behavior are all subject to unrelenting appraisal. If married, they may be accused of neglecting their family; if single, they are out of touch with family life. They may be accused of ignoring women’s interests if they do not pursue feminist policies, but if they do, they are held to be trivializing politics and neglecting ‘real’ issues (quoted in Garrett 1992: 122).

Women MPs in Bangladesh Parliaments have experienced more hostile and anti-women environment. Working areas in the House, in the MP Hostel, in the Districts and in the constituency are male-controlled and this domination has deepened their hardship. We asked the respondents, ‘Do you feel the need of any fundamental reforms in the functioning and procedures of the Parliament Secretariat?’ 89.48% of respondents replied affirmatively and then they were requested to explain what kind of reforms they wanted.’ 54.90% (28 respondents) wanted changes in the procedure for raising various questions in the House. They explained, ‘It is simply impossible and absolutely humiliating for a woman to stand in a queue in front of the concerned room sharp at 5 a.m. to raise a question.’ Services to the women MPs are very meager. One woman Member of the Seventh Parliament explained: ‘The women MPs do not have individual rooms. They sit in a common room together. They do not have assistants, no material, computer or internet facility so that they can go equipped in the Parliament before debate’ (Bhuiyan 1999: 4).

3.06 The Prime Minister's Question Hour

'Questions to the Prime Minister' is one of the most effective tools to ensure accountability of the Prime Minister and her/his government. It is being widely used in Australia, Canada, Britain and India. Through this, Members of Parliament seek to question the Prime Minister about policy matters and day-to-day administration. In the parliamentary process, it is considered one of the most valuable rights of the opposition and non-government Members. In the British system, putting questions to the Prime Minister 'is a prime opportunity for the Leader of the Opposition to put on the political agenda the issue of the day' (Griffith and Ryle 1990: 260).

In 1997, the Prime Minister's weekly question hour was introduced in Bangladesh Parliament. From government's side it was termed as a historic step to promote accountability and transparency of the government. But opposition's view was not fully positive towards this new practice. One of the powerful opposition Members said, 'The exercise just turned into a farce in that instead of allowing opposition members of the Parliament to ask questions to the honourable Prime Minister, the session was being used initially to accept the questions of only treasury bench members. Thus they are using the mechanism as a vehicle for propaganda machinery of the government inside the Parliament rather than allowing the Parliament to function as a forum for establishing the accountability and transparency of the government' (Khan 1999: 3). The opposition's viewpoint is that practically this machinery has been used negatively, as a tool of government's publicity. However, the very introduction of this system is commendable and significance of this step in promoting good governance and in maintaining accountability and transparency would be long lasting.

95% respondents of the Seventh Parliament have experience of asking questions to the Prime Minister. Why did they take interest to ask questions to the Prime Minister? The respondents belonging to AL said, 'Prime Minister's answer reflects the policy of the government'. 'It is highly enjoyable to hear her charismatic reply', 'Her answer is full of wit.' 'We find many things edifying in her reply'. 'She is my leader, so it is my responsibility to listen to her'. The four JP Members we interviewed have recognized that they asked questions to the Prime Minister. But the causes of their interest are different from those of AL Members. 'Prime Minister's direct answer reflects her political depth and cordiality. I was trying to follow her just to get an idea of her line of thinking'. 'I noticed how she was focusing a point interesting to the government and how they were made headlines/news in the House by this tool'; these are the observations of the JP Members. The lone BNP Member of the Seventh Parliament we interviewed was very pessimistic about this newly introduced

tool. She did not ask any questions to the Prime Minister. We wanted to know ‘why she did not ask any question,’ ‘Impractical and unwanted matters were being brought in the frontline through this machinery. It was not beneficial to the nation or country in any way,’ she replied spontaneously.

It should be pointed out here that Prime Minister’s weekly hour was introduced in 1997. Opposition parties started their absenteeism from July 8, 1999. So opposition Members had very limited time to use this tool in the process of responsive governance. In the Seventh Parliament, till June 2001, the Prime Minister answered 329 questions. All women members of the AL and JP asked questions to the Prime Minister. 90% of them raised questions more than once. Their questions were mainly put on ‘political and economic’ issues. Some questions were related to constituency. But very few questions were related to women interests. However, it can be generalized that women Members were enthusiastic to raise questions to the Prime Minister and they had so far used this tool in promoting accountability of the government.

Table 9: Questions to the Prime Minister (Seventh Parliament)

Types of Question	Number of MPs	Percentage
Related to Women Interest	3	9.68
Related to Constituency Interest	10	32.26
Related to Political or Economic Interest	18	58.06

In spite of the observation made above, it should be acknowledged that some sort of political motivation has driven the female and male Members of the government party to raise questions to the Prime Minister and an in-depth study is required to unveil the actual picture in this respect.

3.07 Women's Interest and Women's Issues

One of the main objectives of this study is to highlight how far women MPs, as representatives of the womenfolk, have served the interests of the women community. A good number of relevant questions were included in the questionnaire for their opinions in this regard.

The respondents were very vocal to expose their contribution regarding women development. ‘How much importance did you attach to the interests of the women community?’ 85.96% of the respondents replied that they attached 'top importance'. 14.04% recognized that they gave 'general importance' to the women interest related issues. None of them confessed that women issues did not get any importance to her.

Generally women Members in the reserved seats are elected from those belonging to upper class families and who live in the cities. There is a common impression that they are not aware of the day-to-day problems encountered by the poor and the rural womenfolk. A few questions were included in the questionnaire to get information about their level of interaction with the common women. ‘What are the major problems faced by the womenfolk in Bangladesh?’ We found women MPs have marked off various points as the main problems of the women community. 43.86% respondents mentioned 'economic backwardness' as the principal problem of the general women. 22.80% have perceived 'educational backwardness' was the main problem. To 21.06% respondents 'fundamentalist politics' and to 10.53% Members 'insecurity' are the principal problems.

Table 10: Opinion on major problems faced by the womenfolk in Bangladesh

Problem	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Economic Backwardness	25	43.86
Educational Backwardness	13	22.80
Fundamentalists' Activities	12	21.06
Insecurity	6	10.53
Others	1	1.75

It has been found that overwhelming majority of the respondents have mentioned that they did attach ‘top importance’ to the women’s interests. But when individual woman Member was asked, ‘What is your remarkable contribution for the advancement of the women community?’, none of them could refer to any innovative or exclusive program for women. Female Members were referring to general types of ‘contributions’ like: financial help (54.39%), initiating women organizations (21.06%), providing micro credit (17.54%) and so on.

Table 11: Remarkable contribution of women MPs for the advancement of the woman community

Contribution	Number of MPs	Percentage
Financial Help	31	54.39
Initiating Women Organizations	12	21.06
Provided Micro credit	10	17.54
Others	4	7.01

Female Members of the Parliaments were confronting various hurdles to serve the women community. To 66.67% of the respondents, the major impediment is their ‘indirect electoral process’. Since the people did not directly elect them, local administration and concerned government offices did not accept them with due honor and respect. “We were allowed only 10% of the development works,

excluding ‘system loss’ and other cost we could hardly reach it to the rural women”, said an MP. Besides this indirect electoral process, 17.54% of the women Members mentioned that the major impediment to provide service to the women community is ‘non-cooperation from the local administration’. To 10.53% of the respondents, main impediment is ‘party pressure’. ‘In many cases, we have seen, party whipping and party pressure create problems to serving women neutrally’, remarked an MP.

From her observation in the United States Vallarence said, ‘Parliamentary women have no very clear and certainly very enduring sense of themselves as a group’ (quoted in Gelb 1989: 106). But here we see in Bangladesh, most of the female parliamentarians are interested to work as a group. We asked them, ‘Do you think that women MPs, irrespective of their political affiliation, can work as a group at least for women interests?’ 78.95% of the respondents replied in the affirmative and only 21.05% replied in the negative. Those who replied in the negative explained that because of strong party whipping, they could not work as a women group. But the opinions of the majority numbers of MPs indicate that female parliamentarians are having a sense of oneness.

3.08 In the Committee

In the early years of parliamentarism, there was no committee. But now we cannot think of modern Parliament without the committee system. Famous political scientist Morris-Jones said, ‘A legislature may be known by the Committees it keeps’ (quoted in Firoj 1999: 39). Wodrow Wilson asserted that ‘Congressional Government is committee government’ and ‘Congress in its committee room is Congress at work’ (quoted in Ali 1990: 1). Parliamentary committees are now most powerful and effective tools of confirming government transparency and accountability. Committees perform the oversight and over-seeing functions.

Bangladesh has long acquaintance with parliamentary committees starting from the British rule. After independence, the First Parliament of Bangladesh had only 11 parliamentary committees. In the Seventh Parliament, 46 committees were formed under the Constitutional provisions and the Rules of Procedure. Besides these committees, 47 sub-committees were also formed. So a parliamentary expert rightly opined, ‘It is not known if any other legislature has a committee system with such a large number of committees’ as in Bangladesh. He again asserted that ‘It will not be an exaggeration to state that amongst all the countries which have a Parliamentary System of Government, the Standing Committees on the Ministries in *Jatiyo Sangsad* enjoy the widest powers’ (Miah 1999: 11). These are the observations of the experts. But what are the feelings of the women Members of Parliaments? How had they been working with parliamentary Committees?

All women MPs, interviewed for this study, have recognized that they have earned a lot of experiences by working with parliamentary committees. Women Members were placed in every committee. They felt more comfortable and were articulate with committee activities. ‘Committee is a place where rhetoric speeches are not welcome, more authentic and agenda-based calculative discussion is required’, said a woman Member. What role did they play? 87.72% of the respondents said they were ‘very active with committee matters’. Their presence in the committee meeting was almost 100%. To 85.96% respondents, ‘committee meeting is a forum better than the House’. In the committee, matters are discussed more extensively and concretely. Committees are considered as training grounds of future ministers. Through their committee-experiences Members ground their feet in departmental and ministerial issues. We asked the women Members, ‘Was there any particular issue on which you developed some expertise?’ All of them replied in the affirmative. 89.48% of them said that their area of expertise is limited to committee related issues. 8.77% of them think their expertise is women’s interest related.

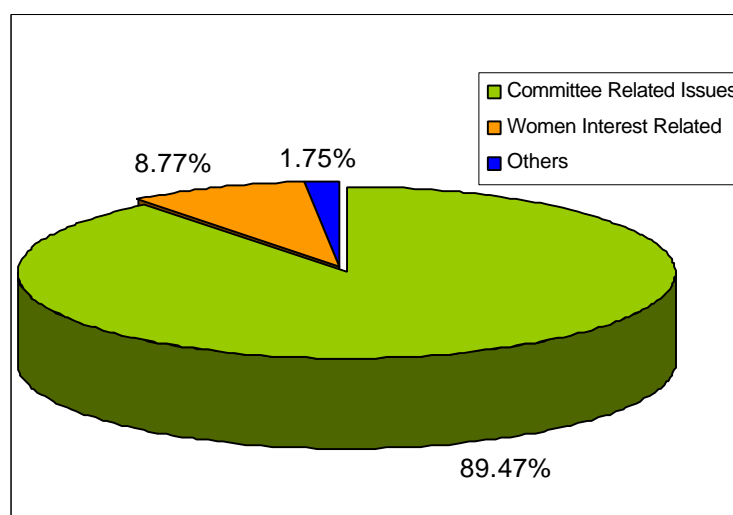


Figure 2: Issues on which women MPs have developed some expertise

The Chairperson plays a significant role in the smooth, impartial and successful functioning of a committee. The post of a Chairperson is not only prestigious, it is considered as groundwork for ministerial position. The Chairperson determines the course of discussion and accommodates divergent political opinions. The long standing practice of the committee system in Bangladesh was chairing a committee by the concerned minister. This practice was changed in 1997 and the ‘Rules of Procedure’ was also changed allowing the non-minister Members chairing the committees. This decision has been termed as historic and as a great contribution to the parliamentary committee system. No woman Member has yet been elected as Chairperson of any committee;

however one woman Member was allowed for one time to chair a committee meeting in the Seventh Parliament in absence of the Chairperson. Opinions of women MPs were sought as to whether women Members should be allowed to serve as Chairpersons of the parliamentary committees. Out of 57 respondents, 52 said ‘Yes, women should be appointed as Chairpersons’. The remaining 5 replied ‘no matter whether male or female, Chairpersons should be appointed as per experience and efficiency.’ Why should women be appointed as Chairpersons? 11.54% of those who replied affirmatively said, ‘If women are allowed to chair, it will bring more dynamism in the functioning of the committees’. 17.31% of them think ‘there will be more transparency’. 69.23% of them replied ‘Female Chairpersonship is required for more dynamism and more transparency in the functioning of the committees’.

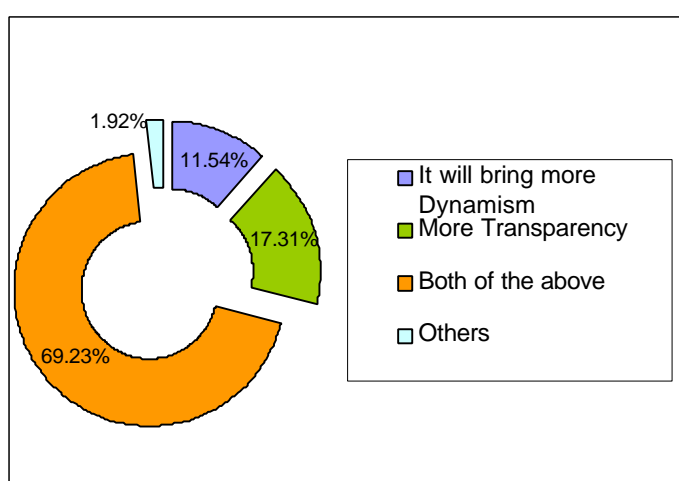


Figure 3: Reasons for allowing women MPs to chairpersonship of the committees

3.09 Law Making

Parliament has many functions. In Bangladesh, Parliament elects the Prime Minister, makes government, plays as a debating forum, scrutinizes and criticizes government’s policies. But the main function of the Parliament is law making. Parliament is considered as the supreme body for making laws (Kavanagh 1990: 215). But what role did women Members of the Bangladesh Parliaments play in the law making process? From initiating a Bill in the Parliament to President’s approval is a long process. We asked at least five questions to women MPs to assess their role in this process. ‘Did you ever initiate any Bill in the House?’ In response to this question only 1 MP replied in the affirmative. Barrister Rabia Bhuiyan of JP initiated a Bill in the Private Members Bill Committee of the Seventh Parliament. In the Bill, there was a demand ‘for One-third Reservation in Parliament and Constitutional Bodies for Women’. It was a Constitution Amendment Bill. The Bill was discussed several times in the Committee but not debated in the Parliament.

Table 12: Bills initiated by women MPs

Parliament	Number of Bill	Total Bill Passed
Fifth	-	172
Seventh	1	193

‘Did you ever work on any Bill as a committee member?’ 36 % respondents of the Fifth Parliament and 70.37% of the Seventh Parliament replied affirmatively and 64% respondents of the Fifth and 29.43% of the Seventh Parliament replied in the negative. Again the respondents were requested to name the Bill on which they worked extensively. Regrettably, none of them, even no Member of the Seventh Parliament could recall the names of the Bills. Then we tried to understand the women’s role in the law making process. ‘Did you ever face any particular obstacle as a woman MP to play your role in the law making process?’ 12.28% of them said ‘yes’ and 87.72% ‘no’. ‘What kind of obstacle(s)?’ ‘Since elected from the reserved seats we were never asked to initiate any Bill’, ‘Apparently it seemed that law making is the special right of frontbencher male MPs’, ‘We are not cordially cooperated to play any role on law making’, these are the replies of the women MPs.

3.10 Reserved Seat System

The main attraction of the topic ‘Women in Bangladesh Parliament’ is the constitutional provision of reserved seats for women. Though there will be no reserved seat in the Eighth Parliament but the impact as well as consequences of the system are yet to be studied thoroughly. This study is an attempt to evaluate the impact of the system in accordance with the perspective of the former women MPs.

Only 10.53% Members think the system had hardly rendered any service to the women. However, 89.47% of the respondents have positive impression about the impact of the reserved system. They have said that reservation has genuinely served the women community. How? ‘Without this system we would find microscopic women in the Parliaments and it would have adversely influenced the process of women’s participation in Bangladesh politics.’ ‘Common women could reach us more easily and we could serve them better than any male MP, our presence in the Parliament was highly beneficial to them.’ ‘Till today, the best service women have received not from any male leader but from women.’ ‘Without women in the reserved seats Bangladesh would loose gender perspective in various issues.’ ‘I recognize we could not serve the women community for many reasons but it does not indicate that the system is a failure.’ These are the widely expressed comments in favor of their positive viewpoints.

Table 13: Number of MPs on the role of the reservation of seats in the advancement of the interests of the women community

Opinion	Number	Percentage
Yes	51	89.47
No	6	10.53
Total	57	100

There is a slim difference between the AL and BNP Members about continuation of the reserved system. 50 (87.72%) MPs said, 'Reservation should continue'. 22 (81.48%) MPs from the AL and 23 (92%) from the BNP bear this opinion. All 4 Members of JP and 1 Member of JEI also belong to this group. Only 7 (12.28%) Members stood against continuation of the reserved system.

Table 14: Women MPs on the continuation of reservation system

Party	Should Continue	Should Not
AL	22 (81.48%)	5 (18.52%)
BNP	23 (92%)	2 (8%)
JP	4 (100%)	-
JEI	1 (100%)	-
Total	50	7

But women Members are having sharply divided opinions on the time duration of the reserved seats. 52% said reservation should be maintained for further 10 years, 34% want for further 15 years and 14% are in favor of 20 years. Very few of them (8%) said, it should continue 'permanently'.

Table 15: Period of continuation of reserved system

Time	Number (total 50)	Percentage
For Further 10 Years	26	52
For Further 15 Years	17	34
For Further 20 Years	7	14
Permanently	2	8
Total	57	100

68% of the respondents who supported continuation of the reserved seats for women mentioned that the number of the reserved seats should be 64, one from each district. 20% of them favored the previous number i.e. 30. 4 respondents (out of 50) expected 150 seats and 2 respondents wanted one-third of 300 seats.

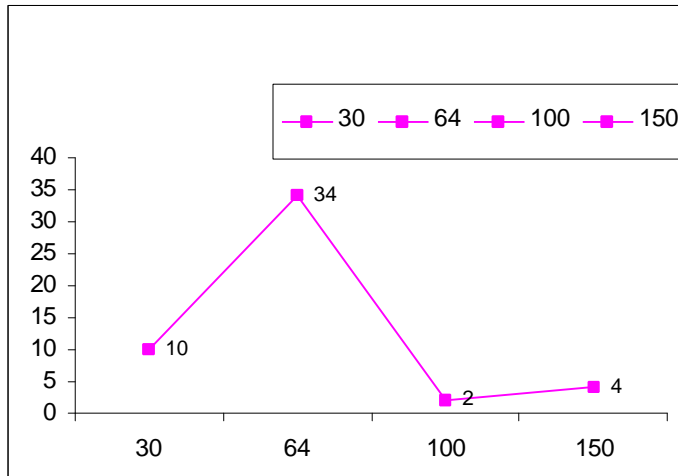


Figure 4: Women MPs on the number of reserved seats

92% (of 50 respondents) women Members demanded that the Eighth Parliament should take immediate initiative to amend the Constitution for continuation of the reserved seats. Women MPs of all parties supported this demand.

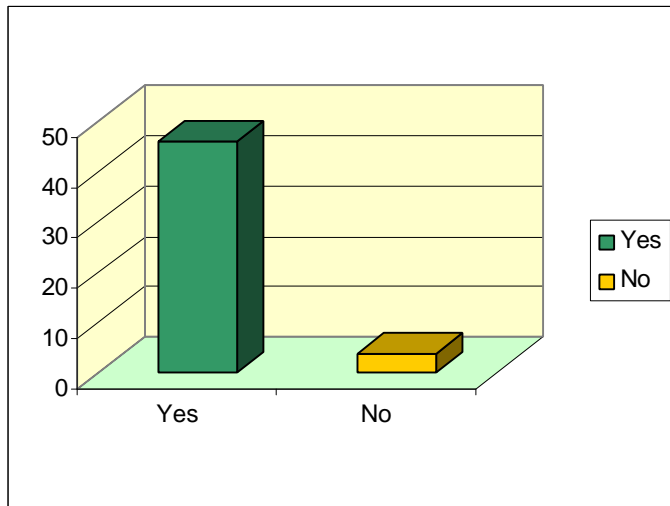


Figure 5: Number of MPs on the role of the Eighth Parliament to amend the Constitution for continuation of reserved seats

What should be the electoral process in the reserved seats? Women Members once again revealed their opinions very candidly. 66% (of 50 respondents) said, women MPs should be elected by direct popular votes. 30% are of the opinion that women MPs in the reserved seats should be elected by the MPs elected in the general seats. Very few (4%) respondents mentioned that they should be elected by the female voters only.

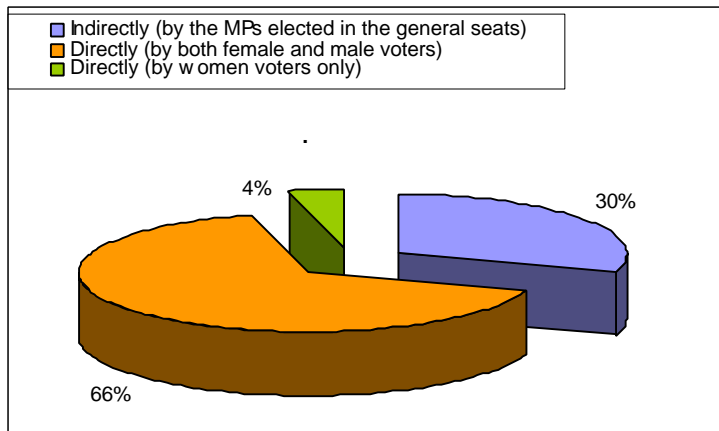


Figure 6: Opinion on the system of election in the reserved seats

Besides reserved seats, former women MPs, almost unanimously, wanted special quota for women seeking nomination for election from general constituencies. 94.74% respondents replied that political parties should allow quota for women candidates. 5.26% did not feel any necessity of quota system.

Table 16: Women MPs on the special quota for women seeking nomination for elections from general constituencies

Opinion	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	54	94.74
No	3	5.26
Total	57	100

But what should be the percentage of the quota? 63.16% of the respondents mentioned that political parties should nominate at least 10% candidates from the women community. 22.81% wanted at least 20% of the total seats. The remaining 14.03% were ambitious; they claimed at least 30% of the total seats.

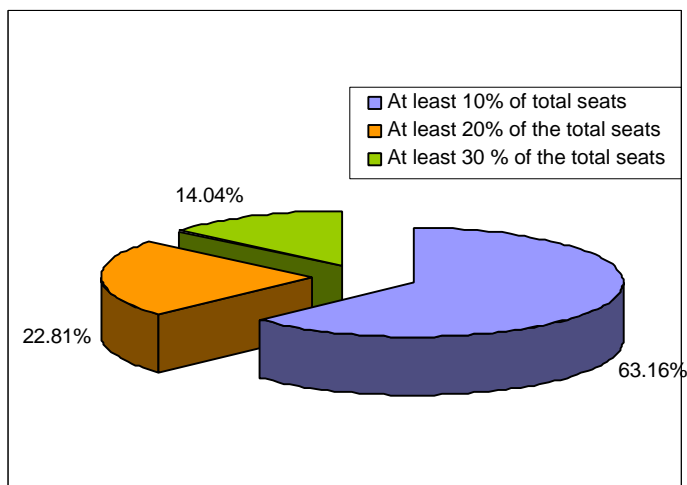


Figure 7: Opinion of women MPS on the percentages of the nominations in the general seats

3.11 Local Administration and Constituency

All of our respondents mentioned that present ‘woman constituency’ is very big in size compared to general seat constituency. At the same time, they observed ‘It is very difficult to represent such a big constituency by a woman’. ‘Did you extensively travel your constituency?’ All 4 Members elected from general seats replied, ‘Yes, I did’. Of those who were elected from the reserved seats 31 (58.49%) of them said ‘No’, 13 (24.53%) said, ‘We traveled but it could not be marked as extensive travel’ and remaining 9 (15.79%) Members claimed, ‘Yes, we traveled to our constituency extensively’.

By and large, all women MPs were involved with development activities of their respective constituencies. So they had to deal with local administrations.

‘What was the level of cooperation did you receive from the local administration?’ Directly elected female Members replied that the local administration was ‘very cooperative’. 69.81% of those who were elected from the reserved seats said they received ‘moderate cooperation’, 22.64% said, local administration was ‘very cooperative’ and 7.55% replied that administration was ‘not cooperative at all’.

To accomplish their parliamentary responsibilities, women Members had to make profound rapport with the local level party leaders. Those who were ‘imposed from the above’ and those who were selected against the opinion of mainstream local leadership, had to face strong opposition initially. Again, the women Members who were active and preparing their own constituencies had to confront a section of local party leaders. Majority Members of all parties (59.26% of AL, 76% of BNP and 75% of JP) have expressed the view that their local party leaders were positive and cooperative with them but a good number of Members (29.63% of AL and 16% of BNP and 25% of JP) have confessed that their local leaders were jealous and non-cooperative.

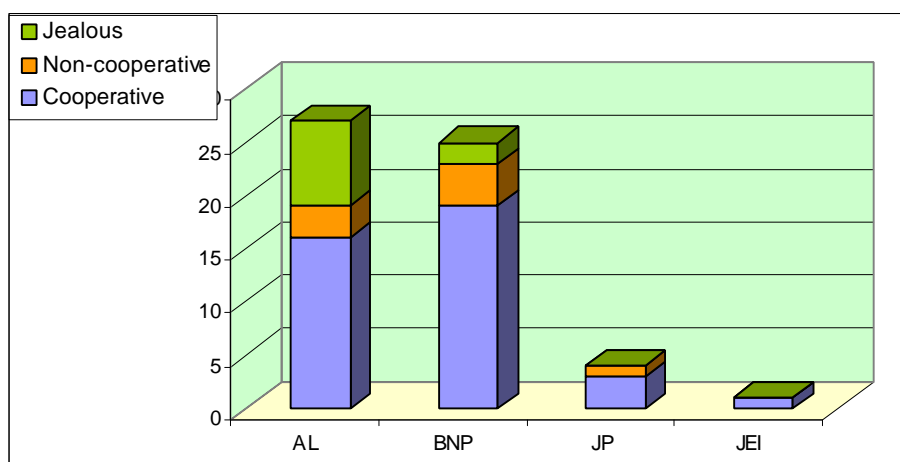


Figure 8: Attitudes of local party leaders towards women MPs

Most of the parliamentarians were reported to be more interested and engaged with development works in their respective areas as both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments lost their images as debating forums due to the continuous boycott of the opposition parties. But getting involved with development activities was not an easy task for the female Members. Usually women MPs are given only 10% of the development works. Beyond this, to get approval of a development project is a highly-lobby intense job and women feel, by nature, uncomfortable in the race. However, female Members initiated and completed many development projects and their projects include: (1) road construction, (2) founding educational institutions, (3) buildings for schools, colleges and *madrasahs*, (4) construction of bridges and culverts, (5) building embankments, (6) dredging ponds, (7) helping needy women and families, etc. Only one female Member of the Seventh Parliament claimed that she got sanction of a big project, passed in the ECNEC meeting. In response to our question, ‘What is your notable contribution to the development of your constituency?’ most of the female Members mentioned various development projects they handled and the total cost of these projects. Our data reveal that on the average women Members of the Seventh Parliament executed more development projects than those of the Fifth Parliament.

Table 17: Development works done by woman MPs

Party	From 20 to 50 lacks tk.	50 lacks to 1 crore tk.	1 crore to 20 crore tk.	20 to 50 crore tk.	50 to 100 crore tk.
AL	7	7	8	3	2
BNP	15	8	2	-	-
JP	3	1	-	-	-
JEI	1	-	-	-	-
Total	26	16	10	3	2

3.12 Male Counterparts and Family Members

How far the environment of the Parliament would be women-friendly depends mostly on the cooperation women Members receive from their male counterparts. Opinions of the respondents were sought about the cooperation rendered to them by the male MPs. When the respondents were asked, ‘In accomplishing your parliamentary responsibilities how much cooperation did you receive from the MPs of your party?’, 29.93% of the AL MPs said ‘excellent’ in reply, 66.66% ‘moderate’ and 7.41% ‘not satisfactory’. The BNP female MPs’ expression was slightly different. 52% of them said ‘excellent’, 40% ‘moderate’ and 8% ‘not satisfactory’. Among 4 the JP Members, 3 replied as moderate and the remaining 1 excellent. The lone JEI Member answered that she received moderate cooperation from her party Members.

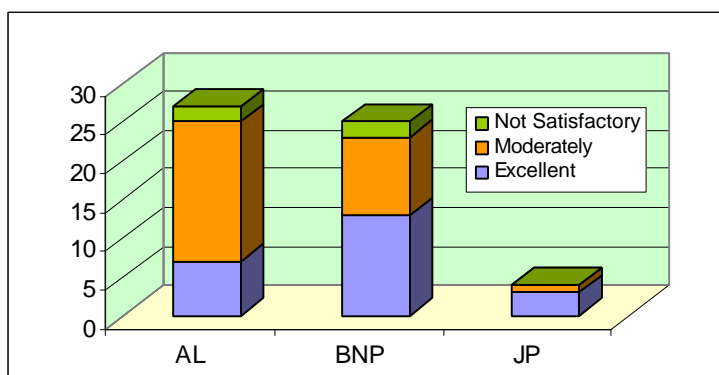


Figure 9: Cooperation received from the male party MPs

In Bangladesh, MPs have been found involved more with development activities than with policy matters. The success of their development activities depended on the cooperation they received from the ministers. ‘How much cooperation did you receive from the members of the ministry?’, was our question to the women MPs. 61.54% Members of the Fifth Parliament told ‘excellent’ in reply, 26.92% ‘moderate’ and 11.54% ‘not satisfactory’. On the other hand, 80.65% Members of the Seventh Parliament told in reply ‘excellent’, 12.90% ‘moderate’ and 6.45% ‘not satisfactory’.

Table 18: Cooperation received from the Ministers

Parliament	Excellent	Moderate	Not Satisfactory	Total
Fifth	16 (61.54%)	7 (26.92%)	3 (11.54%)	26
Seventh	25 (80.65%)	4 (12.90%)	2 (6.45%)	31
Total	41 (71.93%)	11 (19.30%)	5 (8.77%)	57

Two points may be noted here. First, among the AL MPs, those who were elected from the ‘BNP belt’, received more cooperation from the male MPs and Ministers. Primarily, party’s policy was creating constituencies and party-base through the women Members. Second, the party’s male MPs considered those women MPs who were more active, articulate and have access to the party high-ups as ‘potential threats’ and after ‘honeymoon period’ they were not cooperated. Rather they were facing hostile behavior from their male colleagues. But most of the female Members of both the major parties (44.44% of AL and 60% of BNP) said they did not face any discriminatory behavior from the male MPs. 37.04% of AL and 28% of BNP MPs recognized that they faced discriminatory behavior occasionally. 75% female Members of JP, 18.52 % of AL and 12% of BNP Members replied in the affirmative and said they faced discriminatory behavior very frequently from their male counterparts.

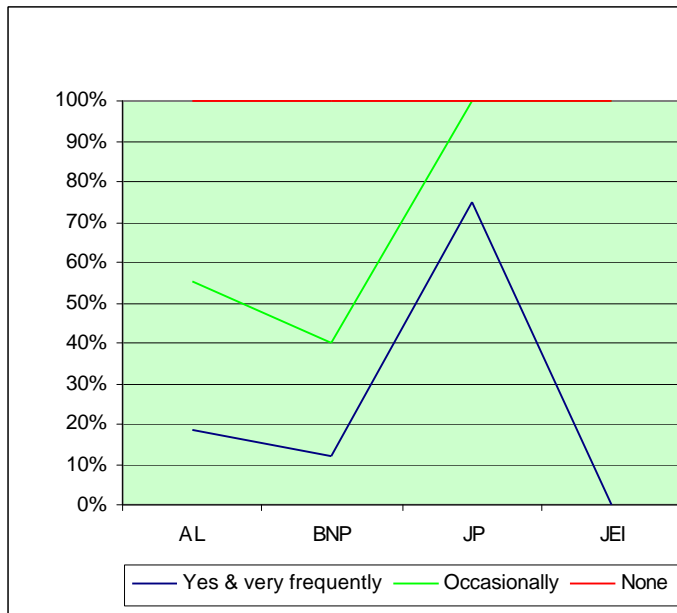


Figure 10: Woman MPs on the discriminatory behavior from the male MPs

3.13 Intended but Unfulfilled Law

The study has already indicated that the role of women MPs in connection with law making is not satisfactory. But most of the MPs are very much concerned about the sufferings of the common women of the country. By virtue of their parliamentary membership many of them have frequently met and interacted with general women of their respective constituencies.

One of the much-discussed issues of the country's legal system is the family law of Bangladesh. After independence, many important legislations have been passed to meet particular social needs and to improve the overall situation of women. The Muslim Marriage and Divorces (Registration) Act of 1974, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance of 1983, The Family Courts Ordinance of 1985, Repression Against Women and Children's Act 1995, Repression Against Women and Children Bill 2000—are the important legal steps and reformative measures to liberate women from repression. But 'the existing family law reforms are...mainly procedural. In particular, they appear unable to protect women effectively from violence and economic deprivation' (Monsoor 1999: Flap). Moreover, the family laws of the country are not applicable to all citizens irrespective of their religious beliefs. Rather personal laws are applied differently to citizens as Muslims, as Hindus or as Christians. So 'early in 1992, the women activists came together to discuss methods by which family laws could be consolidated under one single Family Code applicable to all citizens of the country. In September 1994, the first draft of a Uniform Family Code (UFC) was prepared

by the *Mahila Parishad*, the oldest women's group in Bangladesh' (Khan 2001: 112). The respondents of the present study are very much informed of and interested in this UFC. In response to our question: 'You had an intention to make law on particular subject but it did not ultimately take place. Was there any situation like this? If yes, what was the law intended?' 48 (82.21%) of the respondents replied in the affirmative to the first part of the question and then mentioned various areas on which they were interested to make laws. 52.04% of those, who replied in the affirmative said that their intended laws were about empowerment of women, 29.17% were very specific and their intended law was 'Unified Family Code' and 12.50% said it was law about 'recognizing property right to Hindu women'. 71.43% of women MPs, whose intended law was 'Unified Family Code', belonged to the Seventh Parliament and the remaining 28.57% to the Fifth Parliament.

Table 19: Opinion of women MPs on their intended law

Intended Law	Respondents (total 48)	Percentage
Law about empowerment of women	25	52.08
Law about Uniform Family Code (UFC)	14	29.17
Law about recognizing property right of Hindu women	6	12.50
Others	3	6.25
Total	48	100

3.14 Salaries, Allowances and Benefits

Women MPs have expressed their sharp opinions on the existing structure of benefits—salary, allowances, etc., granted to them. The Seventh Parliament has increased salary structure of MPs. After this rise MPs have been drawing around taka 18,000.00 (eighteen thousand) to 22,000.00 (twenty two thousand) per month including telephone and other allowances. Every MP is entitled to telephone allowance of taka 4000.00 (four thousand) per month.

Among the women MPs, those who reside in the MP Hostel and maintain their families in the constituency area have said that existing salary is not adequate at all. Those who have come from well-established families and live in Dhaka city permanently think that this money matters nothing. They said, 'Salary is modest, we should not expect more from the government'. Most Members of the Fifth Parliament are not well informed of the present rate of benefits for the MPs. 57.69 % Members of the Fifth Parliament said what they were given as salary was not enough at all. MPs should be given more financial benefits keeping pace with top-level government officers. MPs are the defaulters of the

telephone bills. As per a news item, published in a vernacular daily, there is still around 8 crore taka² arrears to the MPs (from the First to the Seventh Parliament). When the attention of the respondents was drawn to this issue, 54.38% (31) respondents said, ‘This is not fair and is clearly a violation of law’. Some of them said, “Arrears are unexpected, but we have to consider that four thousand taka is not enough. As an MP I can’t forbid a person to use my phone. Sometimes people come to our room (MP Hostel)/house just to make a long distance call from our phone. They think it is free and they have ‘right’ to use it as they wish.”

Table 20: Women MPs on the present structure of salary, allowances granted to them

Background	Adequate	Modest	Not Adequate at All	Total
Rural (31)	1 (3.23%)	11 (35.48%)	19 (61.29)	31
Urban (26)	5 (19.23%)	18 (69.23%)	3 (11.54%)	26
Total	6	29	22	57

14 women Members of the Seventh Parliament were the residents of the MP Hostel (within 2nd to 6th block). Most of them think this residential benefit is simply a mockery. ‘How can an MP welcome her guests, constituency people, family members and perform her official jobs living in a single room apartment, compared to the residential facilities given to government officers?’—an angry woman MP expressed her resentment with these words.

By and large, women MPs are dissatisfied with the existing facilities. Here we find sharply divided opinions between the MPs from rural and urban backgrounds. Among the MPs having rural background 61.29% of them said present structure of salary and allowances are not adequate at all. 69.23% of female Members with urban background mentioned that the facilities are ‘modest’. When they were asked, ‘How much more benefits and facilities should be granted to an MP?’ 70.97% respondents with rural background replied, they needed ‘expanded residential facilities’, 57.69% of those with urban background demanded, ‘We should be given at least one secretarial staff’, 19.23% wanted, ‘at least one room for each MP in the Parliament Building’ and 15.39% demanded an ‘office in their respective constituency’.

Table 21: Opinion on facilities should be granted to an MP

Background	Individual room for each MP in the Parliament building	Expanded residential facilities	At least one secretarial staff	Office in constituency	Total
Rural (31)	4 (12.90%)	22 (70.97%)	4 (12.90%)	1 (3.23%)	31
Urban (26)	5 (19.23%)	2 (7.69%)	15 (57.69%)	4 (15.39%)	26
Total	9 (15.79%)	24 (42.11%)	19 (33.33%)	5 (8.77%)	57 (100%)

3.15 Party Expectation

It has already been indicated that political parties are the main actors to nominate and select the women Members for the reserved seats. In the Fifth Parliament, BNP selected 28 women Members from 350 contestants and AL selected 27 Members from over 500 aspirants in the Seventh Parliament. What kind of services does a party expect from a woman Member finally elected in a reserved seat? What is the party perspective?

Table 22: Women MPs on their party's expectation from them

Expectation	AL MPs	BNP MPs	JP MPs	JEI MP	Total
To remain silent & caste vote as party whipping	1 (3.70%)	2 (8%)	-	1 (100%)	4 (7.02%)
To act as & when the party desires	3 (11.11%)	3 (12%)	-	-	6 (10.53%)
To speak for women issues only	5 (18.52%)	5 (20%)	-	-	10 (17.54%)
To speak for any issues	18 (66.67%)	14 (56%)	4 (100%)	-	36 (63.16%)
Others	-	1 (4%)	-	-	1 (1.75%)

Women Members indeed are of divided opinions about their party's expectation from them. Most of the respondents from both the major parties, AL (66.67%) and BNP (56%), were keen to show that their parties gave them full freedom to 'speak for any issue'. A few Members, 11.11% of them from AL and 12% from BNP confessed that their parties wanted that they would only act as and when their parties desired. All four Members of JP claimed that they were free from any obligation and their party wanted them to work as per their own conscience. The lone JEI respondent acknowledged that her party's expectation was to 'remain silent and cast vote as per party's whipping'.

3.16 Strengthening Democracy

Democracy is not a static system rather it is a continuous process. The main strength of Bangladesh's democracy lies in the belief and mindset of her people. The people of Bangladesh clearly demonstrated in 1971 and 1990 that they can fight against colonial power, authoritarian rule and anti-people forces for the

sake of democracy and democratic rule. In spite of their bloody struggle and contribution, Bangladesh's democracy is still not stable and institutionalized. Confrontational politics, lack of tolerance, use of abusive words and speeches, dearth of competent parliamentarians are the factors that have been creating unhealthy environment in the political arena impeding the effective functioning of the Bangladesh Parliament.

Opinions of women Members were sought about the future of democracy in Bangladesh and about the obstacles to normal functioning of the Parliament. They were also requested to place their suggestions for smooth functioning of parliamentary democracy in the country.

21 (36.84%) women Members mentioned that, 'future of democracy in our country is bright', 36 (63.16%) Members said, 'there are impediments but they are recoverable'. But none of them think Bangladesh's democracy has 'no future at all'. The expressed views of the MPs demonstrate that to majority of them (63.16%) the future of democracy is problematic but the problems are not unsolvable. Respondents were asked, 'What is the principal obstacle to the normal functioning of the Parliament and parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh?' 35 (61.40%) Members were found to feel that the principal obstacle is 'lack of consensus between the two major political parties'. Out of the above 35 Members, 17 belonged to AL, 15 to BNP, 2 were adhered to JP and 1 to JEI. According to 13 (22.81%) MPs the principal obstacle to normal functioning of the Parliament is 'lack of tolerance'. 7 (12.28%) said there is 'dearth of parliamentary experiences' and 2 (3.51%) Members mentioned, 'absence of competent parliamentarians' is a major problem in this respect.

Table 23: Opinion on the principal obstacles to the normal functioning of the Parliament and parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh

Party	Lack of consensus between the two major political parties	Dearth of parliamentary experiences	Absence of competent parliamentarians	Lack of tolerance	Total
AL	17 (62.96%)	3 (11.11%)	2 (7.41%)	5 (18.52%)	27
BNP	15 (60%)	4 (16%)	-	6 (24%)	25
JP	2 (75%)	-	-	2 (50%)	4
JEI	1 (100%)	-	-	-	1
Total	25	7	2	13	57

How could these problems be overcome? What are the suggestions of the women Members in this regard? 'Consensus between the two major parties on the basic issues is a must', suggested 66.66% (38) women Members. 8 (14.04%) Members mentioned that 'leaders should behave more reasonably and responsibly'. Remaining 9 (15.79%) Members said, 'We want frequent conversations among the top-level leaders of the main parties'.

3.17 Parliament Secretariat

According to the Rules of Procedure of Parliament: ‘Secretariat means the Secretariat of the Parliament’. Article 79 of the Constitution reads as follows:

- (1) Parliament shall have its own secretariat.
- (2) Parliament may, by law, regulate the recruitment and conditions of service of persons appointed to the Secretariat of Parliament.
- (3) Until provision is made by Parliament the President may, after consultation with the Speaker, make rules regulating the recruitment and condition of service of persons appointed to the secretariat of Parliament, and rules so made shall have effect subject to the provisions of any law.

Parliament Secretariat is thus a constitutional body and it is one of the main actors in the parliamentary process. Opinions of women Members were sought on the performance of the Secretariat. ‘How much cooperation did you receive from the Parliament Secretariat in raising various types of questions, motions and petitions?’ 78.95% of them replied that they received ‘moderate cooperation’, 17.54% said they got ‘excellent cooperation’ and 3.51% informed that they did not receive any cooperation.

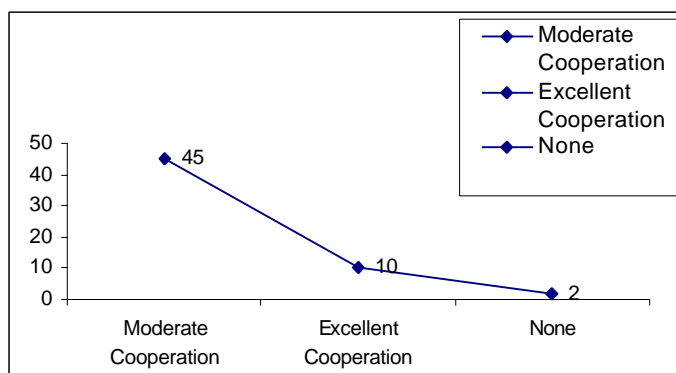


Figure 11: Opinion on cooperation received from the Parliament Secretariat

Indirectly elected women Members were not very assertive to get cooperation from the Secretariat staffs. Rather they followed policy of maneuvering and persuasion to raise their questions, motions and proposals. ‘Do you feel the need of any fundamental reforms in the functioning of the Parliament Secretariat?’ 48 (84.2%) respondents said ‘no’ in reply and the remaining 9 Members (15.8%) said ‘yes’. Those who replied in the affirmative were not very much candid about their intended reforms. Some of them demanded that ‘Secretariat should be more pro-active.’ 5 Members categorically proposed to change the provision of submitting questions at the very morning of the day.

3.18 Donor Agencies

After a vigorous debate on the form of government, the people of Bangladesh opted for parliamentary form with a sky-high expectation. It is not possible to absorb the parliamentary norms and values and make an effective implementation of the system over night. In a new democracy like ours, for effective implementation of the parliamentary system, Members, the House and the parliamentary Committees should be provided logistic support, technical knowledge and expertise. There are several international donor agencies and organizations which are providing financial and technical supports towards strengthening parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. Women Members of the Parliaments are aware of these supports. When women Members were asked, 'Do you think that supports given by the donor agencies are making any positive impact on the process?', 68.42% of the respondents replied in the affirmative and the remaining 31.58% in the negative. One Member said, 'It is a matter of shame that we seek money from the outsiders to establish our prime national institution *Jatiyo Sangsad*.' 5 of the respondents are dissatisfied with paces of implementation of the relevant projects.

3.19 Opinion on Own Performance

Women's role in the Bangladesh Parliament is one of the most controversial and much-talked issues. Their roles have been discussed from multi-dimensional perspectives. But how do the women Members evaluate themselves? Are they satisfied with their own performance? Do they consider themselves successful?

'Are you satisfied with your performance as an MP?' It was indeed an embarrassing question to the introvert women Members. 'My satisfaction does not matter, people's satisfaction level is our prime concern', 'Ask local people, they are the real judges and we are defendants'. These are the spontaneous and primary reactions of the respondents. In fact, most of the Members (49, 85.96%) claim that they are 'moderately satisfied'. Only 5 Members (8.77%) think they are 'very much satisfied' while the remaining 3 (5.26%) Members mention that they are 'not at all satisfied'.

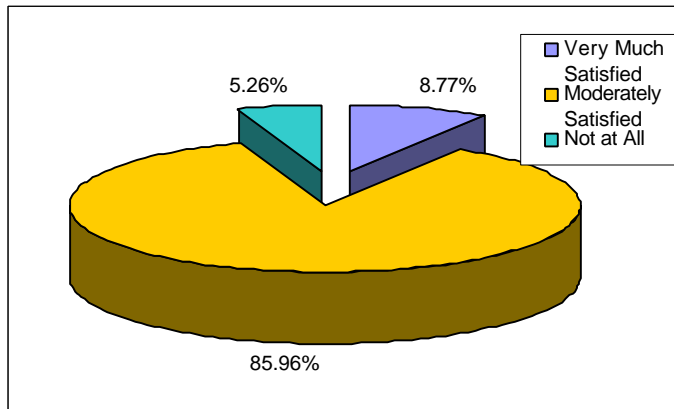


Figure 12: Women MPs on their level of satisfaction on own performance

Do you consider yourself—

- most successful,
- relatively successful or
- unsuccessful?

None of the respondents considered herself as one of the ‘most successful’ MPs. Only two MPs (from the Fifth Parliament) told that they could not work as they planned because of their physical sickness and the remaining 55 respondents claimed that they were moderately successful. ‘Why moderate, why not most successful?’, was our question. ‘After all, we are human beings, no reasonable person can attain hundred percent success’, was their reply.

3.20 Commitment to Ideology

One of the filthy features of Bangladesh politics is that the leaders are not very much faithful to the parties they belong to. They frequently change ideology just to realize their own interest. Before any general election, this trend becomes more visible. Candidates are seen to run after a prospective party at the cost of their ideology, fellow workers and long relationship with their party. Political parties also show their self-seeking behavior; they want only winnable candidates and so welcome these non-committed, selfish candidates. One of the commentators of contemporary politics remarked on horse-trading that: ‘The country is infested with the politicians dictated solely by their self-interest and rules of expediency...By sacrificing conviction at the altar of expediency, both on the parts of individual politicians and political party, a dangerous trend has been set in our society making the course of politics murky and unpredictable’ (Hafiz 2001: 4).

In this overall dismal situation, women MPs and leaders offer slim light of hopes. Women MPs and leaders are less prone to betray their own ideology and the interest of parties they belong to. None of the women leaders have changed their ideology/party for self-interest and position after becoming Members of Parliament. 5 women MPs of BNP were involved with *Chatra League* (student

front of AL) during their student life; they changed their ideology and joined the new party BNP when it was launched in 1979. Some of BNP MPs have experience of working with *Jagodal* and left wing parties but none of the BNP MPs have changed their party after they have become Parliament Members albeit some of them are now inactive in politics. Women MPs of AL are more committed to their party ideology. None of them has the record of changing the banner of the party. Some of them were not directly involved in party activities before becoming Members of Parliament but they come from the broader 'Awami Family'. 19 of the 27 respondents from the AL said that they would seek party nomination to contest in the Eighth parliamentary election. 10 of them have claimed that they have created their constituencies and they are very much confident. But ultimately we found that only 5 of them got their party tickets. None of the disappointed aspirants left the party and ran selfishly although some of them had genuinely been deprived.

CHAPTER FOUR

04. Suggestions and Recommendations

To establish an equitable and meaningful democratic polity, women's active participation is a must. Over the years women have been deprived of their due share in the formal political institutions of the country. Suggestions and recommendations made in this section, on the basis of findings of the study, may be considered as important and relevant to ensure the democratic polity in the country.

4.01 Continuation of Reserved System

The opinions for continuing reserved seat system in the Parliament are mounting in the women's organizations, civil society and human rights organizations. A number of women MPs from both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments have also given their opinions in favor of continuation of reserved seat system. Women MPs from all three major political parties are in favor of this system. Women MPs directly elected from general seats also agree that reservation system should continue. 92.98% of the respondents have demanded that the next (Eighth) Parliament should take immediate initiative to amend the Constitution for reserved seat system.

Recommendations: (a) The reservation should continue to facilitate more women participation in the parliamentary politics of Bangladesh. (b) The Eighth Parliament should immediately enact an amendment to the Constitution effecting the continuation of the reserved seat system in the Parliament.

4.02 Gradual Development of Women Leadership

The main objective of the woman representation in the Parliament through reserved seat system is expediting the political empowerment of women. But how far has the system served the cause of woman empowerment and promotion of women political leadership in Bangladesh? A close observation of the political emergence, the role played by the MPs and the political involvement of the women Members in the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments suggests that reservation system has played a positive role to promote women leadership. In the Fifth Parliament, 28 women Members were elected from BNP; 30% of them are still active in politics. 20% of the women Members (of reserved seat) of the Fifth Parliament are presently Members of the Central Committee or Presidents or General Secretaries of the district BNP or *Jatiyotabadi Mohila Dal*. 10% of them said they would seek party nomination to compete in the Eighth parliamentary election from the general seats; and they thought they had already prepared their constituencies. AL had 27 women Members in the Seventh Parliament from reserved seats. 55% of AL Members had the experience of active political and social involvement. 60% of AL

women Members were found to strongly believe that parliamentary membership was highly encouraging to them and they would desperately be trying to have party nomination to compete in the election from the general seats. A group of relatively young women Members from AL in the Seventh Parliament were very impressive and they were very confident about their own constituencies. It is true that former women MPs, who were very much active in BNP politics and were office bearers of the party, are lagging far behind compared to their male counterparts in controlling the party's rank and file. But it is remarkable that all former women MPs from BNP are not lost in the politics and the women MPs from AL have shown their self-confidence and commitment in pursuing enduring leadership in Bangladesh politics. Thus the experience of the system of reserved seat in the Parliament shows that it is very significant for the gradual development parliamentary democracy vis-à-vis the empowerment of women.

Recommendations: (a) Therefore, it may be recommended that political parties should preserve the policy of reservation system for women in the Parliament and encourage them to take active part in the politics in larger number. (b) Women MPs can be encouraged to make minimum agreement over the issues of women development and empowerment irrespective of their party affiliation.

4.03 Direct Election for the Reserved Seats

We find a consensus on continuation of reserved seat system. But women MPs are divided on the question of how should MPs be elected from the reserved seats. 30% of the respondents think that the electoral process should be indirect. While 66% of them prefer direct election. Differences of opinions are seen among the political parties, members of civil society and of women's movements with regard to the mode of election. Those who favor indirect election argue that: (a) At present the number of total voters in a general seat constituency is around 2,50,000 (total voters in the country are approximately 7,50,00,000³); in a reserved seat constituency (if total seats are 64) the number of voters would be nearly 12 lacs, almost 5 times larger than a general constituency. It would be very difficult, almost impossible, for a single candidate (even if the candidate is a man) to effectively prepare, manage and represent such a big constituency. (b) Direct election will not help the women community; rather it will throw them in an adverse situation. (c) Women are not yet well accomplished, in terms of constituency, party politics and position, to compete in a direct election. (d) At present, winning in an election depends on two 'Ms'—money and muscle. Women have neither of the two. Moreover, they are ethically against using any muscle power in politics, so they are 'unfit' for election politics.

On the other hand, arguments in favor of direct election are: (a) “Until and unless women MPs would be directly elected, their power, authority and status as Members of Parliament would not be established; rather underestimation and humiliation to them will continue...since the women members of the *Jatiyo Sansad* are nominated by the ruling party, their ‘status’ as members of the *Sangsad* is never equal to their male counterparts who are elected” (Zaman 1996: 8-9). (b) Under indirect system, women’s reserved seats are taken by the party/parties with maximum seats and it enables them to form the government or to secure two-third majority in the House. In this way, reserved seats serve only the particular party/parties, not the women community. So “Members of the civil society, women’s movement and academia have reached a consensus that...the modality for election to the reserved seats for women in the Parliament be direct election” (Kabir 2000: 8). (c) An indirectly elected MP does not feel any accountability to her constituency; rather she is obliged to her party’s high ups, even not to the party’s rank and file. (d) The *Union Parishad* election of 1997 has proved that women are capable of direct election and they can compete neck to neck with the male in general seats. “The UP election attracted more than 46,000 female candidates competing for 12,828 reserved seats and another 4,000 female candidates competed for the general seats. Furthermore, as many as 20 female candidates were also elected to the post of chairmen. The participation of women voters in the elections was the highest so far” (Kabir 2000: 9). Lesson of this election is encouraging for women candidates interested to compete in the national election. Even in the larger constituencies, as the history of representation system of this country shows, women have the experience of direct election. During the provincial election of 1954 (famous United Front Election), 12 women candidates were elected from the limited geographic constituencies. In the 1956 Constitution, a provision was maintained for direct election in the reserved seats. Furthermore, Taskforce, established by the neutral caretaker government of 1991, in its report, recommended for direct election in the reserved seats (Chowdhury 1994: 27).

Recommendations: (a) The number of women reserved seats should be increased to 64 and (b) MPs in the reserved seats should be directly elected.

4.04 Committee Chairpersonship

One of the major achievements in the way of restoring parliamentary supremacy in Bangladesh is the insertion of the provision of chairing parliamentary committees, instead of concerned ministers, by Members of Parliament. Everyone has welcomed this provision. But unfortunately no woman MP was selected as chairperson of any Committee in the Seventh Parliament. 91.23% of our respondents have distinctly given their opinions that woman MPs should be allowed to serve as chairpersons of the Committees. The reasons for women’s chairpersonship, according to them, are: (a) it will bring dynamism in the

functioning of the Committees and (b) there will be more transparency if women are allowed in the chairpersonship of the committees. We feel that women must be allowed to serve as chairpersons of the Committees; without chairing in the committees, women's experience in the parliamentary life will remain partial.

Recommendation: It may be recommended that women MPs should be allowed to chair at least 25% of the parliamentary Committees.

4.05 Training to Serve Women's Interest

The main objective of the reserved seat system in the Parliament is to promote the interests of the womenfolk. Women MPs are also aware of their responsibilities to women community. In both the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments they attached top importance to the women interests and they contributed remarkably in the sphere of forming women groups, giving credit to poor women, arranging training programs for the educated young girls, etc. However, they failed to take any inventory program or initiative for the interest of the women community.

Recommendation: Women MPs should be supported with orientation training about women's view-points and should be given opportunities to visit the Parliaments of the developed countries.

4.06 Imperative of Separate Constituency

The Bangladeshi women's rights activists are fortunate, compared to their Indian counterparts, in a sense that they did not have to launch any movement to include provisions for women's parliamentary reserved seat system in the Constitution (see Sharma 2000). The Constitution framers incorporated the aforesaid provisions in the Constitution. It was an advanced and complementing step for women's increased participation in politics. However, they were not given any independent constituencies. The situation was like a Bengali proverb: *dhal nai talowar nai nidhiram sarder*. To accommodate the female Members the total territory of the country was divided into 30 constituencies and by constitutional provision women MPs were asked to represent these vast areas along with the MPs elected from the general seats. This created a problem of overlapping and very reasonably female Members, elected from the reserved seats, were fatal victims of the situation. In fact, they were Members without any definite constituencies to nurture, voters to care and machinery to be accountable to. Those who, among the women Members, were assertive, very active and tried to prepare their constituencies encountered serious antagonism from their male counterparts, irrespective of party affiliation. As a result, it was found that despite their hard work, reasonable development activities and their dedication, women Members were considered as floating and MPs without

constituencies. Without exclusive constituencies women Members would not be able to raise their voices, implement their projects and ground their feet on the solid foundation of parliamentary politics. Moreover, separate constituencies for reserved seats may also help women to make them relatively free from male domination.

Recommendation: The Constitution should be amended to provide separate constituencies to the female Members of the reserved seats.

4.07 Women's Nomination for General Seats

In a report presented recently, it has been claimed that the number of female voters in the general election of 1996 was higher than the male.⁴ By and large, women always constitute half of the voters. But their presence in the general elections as candidates is very insignificant. In the first parliamentary election (1973), women constituted 0.3% of the total candidates and no women candidate won any seat. In the second general election (1979), female contenders were just 0.9% of the total contestants and again no woman was elected. In this Parliament, women won 2 seats in by-elections. In the third parliamentary election, women's participation increased a little. Female candidates constituted 1.3 % of the total candidates and won five seats. In the fourth general election, women's participation again decreased to 0.7% and 4 female won (this election was boycotted by all major parties). In the parliamentary election of 1991, women constituted 1.5% of the total contestants and finally they got 5 seats. In the seventh parliamentary election, women's participation was 1.39% (data received from the table presented by Husain 2000: 70) of the total candidates and in this Parliament women won 8 seats (3 seats in by-elections). In the Eighth parliamentary election, total number of candidates was 1933. Among them women were only 37 (1.91%). The above data reveal that women were very marginally present in the electoral process compared to female voters. The respondents (63.16%) of this study have categorically mentioned that political parties should offer at least 10% party tickets to the women to contest from the general seats.

Recommendation: We recommend that the Constitution should incorporate provision to provide 10% special party quota for women seeking nomination for election from the general seats, which can play the role of a safeguard for women's interests in this regard.

4.08 Role of the Civil Society

‘Civil society’ has been defined as ‘an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy an autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by the members of society to protect or advance their interests or values’ (White 1996:182). The civil society organizations have an enormous role to play in a democracy. In Bangladesh, we see an active civil society. Thousands of NGOs, women organizations, vocal press, teachers and social associations, human rights organizations, writers and litterateurs, journalists associations and intellectuals form civil society. Civil society organizations played a significant role in the movement for democracy in 1990s. More than 50% of the respondents have mentioned that civil society’s role in today’s politics is very significant.

Recommendation: Civil society organizations should take united programs to facilitate the process of women empowerment and donor agencies may provide assistance for strengthening civil society organizations.

4.09 Sense of Non-Government Membership

In the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments, most of the women MPs were elected from the government parties and they were ‘government party Members’. But ‘government party Members’ and ‘government Members’ are not the same thing. In the parliamentary form of government, ‘government Members’ are those who hold ministerial posts. Other Members, whether they belong to the government party or to opposition party or independent, are non-government Members. The main responsibilities of the non-government Members are ensuring accountability and transparency of the government. In the developed parliamentary systems, non-government Members create pressures on the government and behave as a catalyst to change the government’s policies and for initiating new ideas and policy matters. Sometimes they act as a lifeline of parliamentary system. But in the naive parliamentary system like ours, division between government and non-government is not sharp, rather over allegiance to the party hinders this process. In our country, women MPs elected from the reserved seats have always been accused of behaving as sycophants of the government party and top-level party leaders. They failed to make their role a firm base and did not succeed to keep their feet on the solid ground. The very political culture, individualistic politics and the Article 70⁵ of the Constitution are responsible for over party allegiance. The change of political culture is a matter that needs a long-term practice. But the constitutional provision hindering scope of autonomous role of the MPs may be reformed.

Recommendation: The Article 70 of the Constitution should be relaxed so that MPs can express their views and cast their votes independently.

4.10 Responsibilities of the Political Parties

Political parties are the main forces to ensure increasing women's roles in the formal political institutions. In Bangladesh all major parties hold the opinion that reserved seats system for women in the Parliament should continue. The political parties also verbally support the issues of increasing reserved seats and the direct electoral process. But neither of the two major parties included the direct electoral provisions in their Bills presented in the Seventh Parliament. It hurt and stirred the women's organizations and civil society and ultimately it became clear that political parties were just playing with the womenfolk without giving any real attention but lip-service.

94.74% respondents of this study demanded that political parties should allow special quota for women seeking nomination from the general seats. 63.16% of them claimed that at least 10% nominations should go to the women candidates. Since there will be no reserved seats in the Eighth Parliament, women were more enthusiastic to get party tickets from the general seats. But when the lists of the party nominees were announced, it was found that only 10 (3%, including party chief) women got AL nomination and 6 (2%, including the party chief) women were given BNP tickets. This scenario indicates that political parties are not serious to serve the women's cause; they are rather more inclined to 'numbers game'. Number is very important to form government and political parties do not consider women 'winnable candidates'. So they were excluded from the party nominations.

Recommendations: (a) Political parties should engage more and more women in party activities giving important position in the party structure. (b) At least 10% nominations should be given to women by the political parties to contest for the general seats. (c) Political parties should encourage and backup female aspirants to contest local level elections to facilitate gradual development of contesting women leadership.

4.11 Alternative Organizations and Grassroots Politicians

It has been bitterly felt that women issues were never given top priority by political parties. Women have always been soothed that their demands will be addressed, but not instantly. In other societies too the scenario is always the same. Referring to the Algerian experience Helie-Lucas has described this situation very interestingly: "We are made to feel that protesting in the name of women's interests and rights is not to be done NOW:... during the liberation struggle ...not after independence, because all forces had to be mobilized to build up the devastated country...Defending women's rights 'now'—this now being ANY historical moment—is always a 'betrayal': of the people, of the nation, of the revolution, of Islam, of national identity, of cultural roots"

(quoted in Rai 1996: 241). This sort of problems due to the non-action of political parties can be overcome by building alternative organizational structure and for the best result, throughout the country beginning from the grassroots levels.

Recommendation: Women should be mobilized in different organizations throughout the country and their organizations should take fresh initiatives to establish strong structural network from urban to rural areas in order to pressurize political parties to give priority to the women issues.

4.12 Gender Perspectives and the Constitution

The Bangladesh Constitution purports to protect women and maintains provisions guaranteeing women's equal rights. Articles 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 27, 28, 29 and 65 of the Constitution deal with women's equal rights and their participation in the Parliament. Article 9 states: 'The State shall encourage local Government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representatives shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women'. Article 10 reads: 'Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life'. The Article 19 says: 'The State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens'. Article 27 reads: 'All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law'. Article 28 of the Constitution declares:

- (1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- (2) Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.
- (3) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution.
- (4) Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.

Article 29 reads:

- (1) There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic.
- (2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office in the service of the Republic.

Clause 3 of Article 65 of the Constitution maintained the provision of reserved seats in the Parliament. By including the aforesaid Articles and provisions in the Constitution the makers acknowledged the existing inequality between men and women and declared the duties of the State to eradicate the disparity. In accordance with the spirit of the Constitution-makers, some legal steps were also taken but the experiences of the last 30 years portray that these did 'not go far enough, nor do the constitutional guarantees mean much in the private sphere' (Monsoor 1999: 130) and in the public sphere. Womenfolk of the country are still lagging far behind men in all spheres of life despite all these advanced provisions and good intentions of the Constitution-makers. Why?

Till now, women had been considered as the weaker sex and it was felt that they should be given protection. This idea engulfed the Constitution-framers, lawmakers, law-implementing authorities, political leaders and social activists. Especially political leaders' mindset is that women are meager, backward; they should be shown kindness, not the equal partnership. Women are not considered as co-fighters, eligible to work neck to neck with male counterparts. Until and unless this kind of mindset would be changed and equal gender perspectives will prevail, constitutional protection and legal advancements will remain mere words in the 'holy' books.

Recommendations: (a) Measures should be made to give effect to the constitutional provisions, particularly by giving women independent charges in government and semi-government organizations. (b) Seminars, symposiums and workshops may be organized highlighting the significance of the constitutional provisions related to women's rights in order to bring changes in the male mindset. (c) Short and long term research projects may be carried out to identify the problems in the way of implementing relevant constitutional provisions and suggesting solutions thereof.

4.13 Fanatics' *Fatwa*: A Curse to Fight Out

Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, backward fundamentalist activities are one of the major impediments to the increasing women's participation in politics. Women are the worst victims and targets of the fundamentalist politics. 21.06 % respondents of our study have candidly mentioned that fundamentalists and their activities are a curse and this should be fought out. Fanatics still have some pockets where they create obstacles in the ways of women's involvement with politics and development activities. They declare *fatwa* forbidding women to take part in the politics, in the electioneering and even to come out of four walls. 'They went to the extent of declaring that voting for women candidates would be a sinful act; and if women voted in the election, God's scourge would befall them' (Husain 2000: 79).

These types of *fatwas* have been the causes of turning back many a women in the public sphere and ruination in the personal sphere.

In the campaigning of the eighth parliamentary election, we have seen some leaders (including former autocrat, General Ershad) and *Peers* to preach against women-leadership. They dared to target former Prime Ministers, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, and branded them as anti-Islamic. They announced that no women leader was acceptable to them even if she was a close relative to them. Through the Eighth parliamentary election Bangladesh has again shown its strong commitment to democracy and clear belief on women leadership, it is the one side of the coin; on the other side, fundamentalists and fanatics have also tried to ground their teeth in this land. Thus, measures should be made against this fundamentalist, fanatics and *fatwas* to give democracy a solid ground as well as women to participate in national political and other activities.

Recommendations: (a) The government should take stern legal actions against those who declare illegal *fatwas*. (b) Anti-women leadership propaganda should be prohibited. (c) NGOs and social organizations should mobilize public opinion in favor of women leadership emphasizing the point that women leadership is not anti-Islamic rather it is utmost necessary to establish balanced and exploitation-free society.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. Conclusion

1. *Women and Greater Parliamentary Politics:* Women's performance should be examined in the perspective of the overall success and failure of the parliamentary politics in Bangladesh. The Fifth Parliament started its functioning after the wreckage of repeated autocratic rules. It was not easy to practice and absorb the parliamentary norms and values in a newly emerged democracy. Despite its failures and limitations, the Fifth Parliament was able to complete its full tenure. The Seventh Parliament also completed its tenure and initiated some positive steps in order to make far-reaching effect on the evolution of parliamentary politics in Bangladesh. Introducing the Prime Minister's question hour, chairpersonship of MPs instead of Ministers in the parliamentary committees, establishing Institute of Parliamentary Studies—are significant steps to make the executive accountable to the Parliament and to equip the lawmakers to be successful as efficient parliamentarians. A good number of bills were presented and passed in these Parliaments. All the budgets of the last decade were discussed and approved by the two Parliaments. The parliamentary committees functioned normally with the participation of both government and opposition Members. Numbers of urgent public matters, resolutions, private members bills, motions and questions were presented, discussed and answered in the House. But the success of the Parliaments as meaningful debating forums, law-making authorities, ensuring government's accountability, scrutinizing government's activities is put within the brackets of question mark. Most disgraceful feature of both the Parliaments is their failure to bring the opposition parties in the House. In fact, the overall functioning of the Fifth and the Seventh Parliaments is tainted by the rigid and so-called uncompromising attitudes of the two major parties. If both the Parliaments could work with full strength of government and opposition Members, the 'balance sheet' of parliamentary politics in Bangladesh would have become different.

2. *Limitations of Women MPs:* Apart from this dismal situation, women MPs had to perform their parliamentary responsibilities in a more competitive and anti-women environment. Women MPs elected from the reserved seats encountered a good number of hurdles: (1) Indirect electoral process undermined their position, status and effectiveness as MPs. (2) They had to

perform in an adverse and, to some extent, anti-women environment. (3) Tide party whipping and 'over-party' allegiance adversely affected their performance as Members of Parliament. (4) Each female Member, elected from the reserved seat had to represent relatively a giant constituency, almost ten times bigger than a general constituency. (5) Among the women Members who were pro-active and preparing their own constituencies had to face negative competition even from the party's male counterparts. (6) MPs elected from the reserved seats had in fact no constituency. Sometimes they had to seek prior permission from the concerned MPs elected from the general seats to take or implement any development project. (7) They were given only 10% share of all development activities. (8) Most of the women Members were poorly equipped, less assertive to perform within the House or outside the House as Members of the Parliament and (9) Local party leaders, activists and local administration were less responsive to the women MPs. These limitations resulted adverse influence on the part of the women MPs to raise women issues in the Parliament meaningfully.

3. *Success of Women MPs:* In spite of all of the above and many other adversary foes and process, women MPs performed their duties with confidence and competently in some areas: (1) Female Members were very attentive and serious to attend the sittings of the House and the Committee Meetings. (2) Women MPs were less expensive and more transparent and honest. (3) Almost all of the female Members had utmost endeavors to initiate and implement development projects in their respective constituency areas. (4) They were less affected by party-biasness in distributing fruits of development activities. (5) Common and poor women had relatively more and free access to female Members of the Parliament. (6) Some of the women Members were desperate to initiate gender perspective in the projects they introduced and (7) Women leaders and MPs were not interested to link politics with black money and muscle.

4. *Democracy Minus Women is Not a Democracy:* 'A democracy is a government of all, for all, and by all', as said by Theodore Parker. But who is this 'all'? The people of all classes, all communities, all groups and all strata belong to this 'all'. In any consideration, women form the large portion of the people. Experts view that, 'Democracy can be imposed from above or from outside, but whether a particular democracy survives through good and bad times depends on whether it has built up on the deep-rooted cultural attachments among the citizens.' So, if we want to establish a true democracy 'for all' and a democracy deeply rooted among our citizens, women's issues should be resolved with due care and sincerity. Undoubtedly, political parties are the main forces to play a significant role in this regard. Political parties should be prudent enough to read the writings of the walls. Women are getting

awakening; they cannot be deprived any more of their equal rights in all formal political institutions including the Parliament. Giving equal share to women in the decision-making bodies and recognizing its importance is, therefore, fundamental to the existence and working of true democracy. It should not be forgotten that 'Democracy minus women is not a democracy'.

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Notes

¹ see Shawkat Ara Husain, “Women’s Participation in Electoral Politics”, *Empowerment*, vol. 7, 2000, Women for Women, Dhaka

² *Prothom Alo*, June 21, 2001, Dhaka.

³ *The Daily Star*, September 21, 2001, Dhaka.

⁴ *The Daily Star*, 23 August, 2000, Dhaka.

⁵ It has been said that Article 70 of the Constitution has circumscribed the independence of the individual parliamentarians. The Article reads:

“A person elected as a member of Parliament at an election at which he was nominated as a candidate by a party shall vacate his seat if he resigns from that party or votes in Parliament against that party.

Explanation.—If a member of Parliament—

- (a) being present in Parliament abstains from voting, or
- (b) absents himself from any sitting of Parliament,

ignoring the direction of the party which nominated him at the election as a candidate not to do so, he shall be deemed to have voted against that party”.

